

Title: The Grass Is Always Greener...

Rating: PG-13, A/U, Drama, Romance, Mild Violence

Important Pairings: HP/DG

Summary: During the second term of Harry's sixth year, he ends up saving Daphne Greengrass from a fate worse than death. To repay him, she teaches him Occlumency and they get to know each other well enough to learn that labels are not always useful, and that treasures can be found in unusual places. Vaguely follows events found in book 6.

((A/N: For every author who writes enough stories, I think they should have a "Good boy falls for 'bad' girl" story. This is mine. I had wanted a longish one-shot, but the story grew. I could still make it a one-shot, but it would stretch the definition to the breaking point. :-) So you'll get 4 chapters. This story also contains mild Dumbledore bashing.

I want to give a big "THANKS!" to ReadingFreak2005 for beta'ing this story. He wanted to try beta'ing and has done a pretty good job with it. Any errors left are mine.

Note to those waiting on "Lily's Child". Real Life has not been kind to my beta team. Then about the time chapter 2 made its way back to me, I lost the motivation to write for a couple of weeks. Fortunately, my desire to write is coming back, and proof is the release of this story. It's been sitting on my hard drive for a while and I finally decided to let someone else look at it and then release it into the wild.

Disclaimer for the obvious-impaired: This is fanfiction, and as such, the Harry Potter universe this story resides in is not mine, but belongs to someone commonly known as JKR. I am not her; I am not even the right gender to be her. Anything that looks like hers is, the rest is mine. No profit is being made on this, yada, yada, yada.

This is meant to be a fun read. I hope you enjoy it. -- Kevin))

The Grass Is Always Greener...

Chapter 1

Harry Potter put his Marauder's map away and pulled out his Invisibility Cloak, disappearing from sight a few seconds later. He was on his first reconnaissance mission after the Christmas break of his sixth year and his quarry was just down the hall in an unusual situation that he felt like he needed to check out. Fortunately, he had already cast a Silencing spell on his shoes, so he noiselessly crept up to the next hallway to see and hear what was going on.

He peeked around the corner to see his nemesis, Draco Malfoy, holding his wand on a regal looking girl he had spoken to maybe once in the last five and half years. That did not mean he did not know who she was, everyone knew who the Ice Queen was. He was curious to know why Draco, along with his ever present two goons, appeared to be ganging up on one of their own. Slytherins never fought each other, at least not in public.

"Leave me alone, Malfoy. You do not want to do this." The tall statuesque golden blonde, known as Daphne Greengrass, or the Ice Queen to many, told the white-blond boy in front of her in her typical cold tone. "You will be sorrier than you can ever imagine."

"But I think I do want this, Greengrass." Malfoy slowly and lightly trailed the tip of his wooden wand over her robes from just under her chin down to the middle of her body. "Besides, after I've finished -- experiencing you -- you need never even remember, so nothing will happen to me."

As Harry figured out what was going on, he was not sure if he was more sickened by the lustful sound of Malfoy's voice or the leering of his two followers. No matter, he could not let this happen, even if it was to a Slytherin. No girl deserved to be taken advantage of like this; the three on one numbers just made it worse.

Knowing he had to get Malfoy first, he carefully crept around the corner so he could get a good shot. He heard Greengrass continue her threat, and that was helpful as it kept everyone's attention away from him.

"Malfoy, even if you Obliviate me, I'll eventually figure out something has happened, and as you're the only one who won't leave me alone,

I'll come after you just because." Her voice lowered even more as she finished her threat. "So help me, if you don't let me go right now, you may be the last Malfoy ever -- if I have my way."

Crabbe and Goyle gulped. Even Malfoy looked like he was having second thoughts for a few seconds. Then he laughed nervously. "Right, sure you will," he drawled. "I've got my wand out and you don't. So I don't think you're in any position to make any demands of me. I think I'll just..."

Harry was now in position and with Malfoy's declaration, Harry felt no remorse about sticking the barest tip of his holly wand through the crack of his Cloak and whispering, "Stupefy."

Malfoy had just started to crumple when Greengrass took a quick step to her left and swiftly brought her knee up into Crabbe's groin. Harry was so amazed he did not bother with Goyle, but watched the girl turn and kick her right foot out. Goyle also went down moaning and holding his crotch. Greengrass pulled her wand out and quickly fired off two Stunning spells to silence to two moaning boys.

Daphne dropped her wand hand to her side and spoke into the silence. "So who decided to help me?"

Harry decided he probably could escape this if he really wanted to, but he had not done anything wrong, so he answered, "That would be me."

She looked straight at him, though it was obvious by her expression that she could not see him. "Potter? Is that really you?"

Taking a deep breath and hoping for the best, he lowered the hood of his Cloak so his head was visible. "Yeah, uh, sorry, I didn't mean to interfere in your private business, but, uh, it just didn't seem right. I mean, you know, no girl should have to, uh, do something they didn't want to..." He knew he had to be blushing as he trailed off. He just could not say the word.

To his great surprise, the Ice Queen smiled at him and gave a small chuckle. "I never thought I'd be thanking a Gryffindor."

He had to smile too. "That's all right; I never thought I'd have to save a Slytherin." He looked down on the three unconscious boys. "I suppose I should go back to my dorm, but do you need any help with them before I leave?"

"What? You don't want to take advantage of me too, Potter?" she asked with a calculating smile. It was the sort of smile that spoke of plans one did not want any part of.

"Ah, no, no thanks. I've, uh, I've saved someone today and I think that's enough." He started inching backwards.

She gave him another chuckle and the slightly evil smile was replaced by one filled with humor. "Don't worry Potter, you're safe with me. I don't kill my savior. In fact, I'd prefer to reward him. Need a small favor?" Her wand came up as she lazily turned from him and looked up at the ceiling. She muttered a Sticking charm all over the ceiling above her.

"What are you doing?" His curiosity had to know before he left.

"Accio wands," she mumbled and caught the three wands that came to her. Those she placed at the base of the wall. Greengrass did a conjuring spell with a word he had not heard before. Suddenly, there were a number of little white bugs all over the wands. She looked up at him and answered his unspoken question, "Termites."

"Devious." He was impressed with that detail.

"Leviosa"

The spell hit Crabbe and lifted him up the ceiling, flipping him so he was face down. When she ended the spell, he stayed up there. She did the same thing with Goyle.

"I suppose that's one way to keep them out of your hair," he commented. "What about Malfoy? Does he get the same or something worse?"

"Oh, him?" Daphne casually flicked her wand and silently Vanished the Slytherin boy's robes. He was left in just his shoes, socks, and boxers.

"Oh, ugh! I really didn't need to see that," Harry complained.

"My apologies, Potter. I didn't want to see that pitiful sight either, but it is part of my plan to make sure he learns that attacking me is a very bad idea." She cast a conjuring spell with another word that Harry had never heard before, but it was obvious what had happened. Malfoy's boxers were filled with something. If he did not know any better, he would have said the result was as if Malfoy had done an enlarging charm on himself, but he knew she had done a conjuring spell.

"Sorry if I seem a bit thick, but what did you just conjure?" He really had to know before he left.

The evil smile came back. "Catnip. Stupefy." She stunned Malfoy again for good measure.

"Catnip? Why?"

"You've never been around a cat before, have you?" She looked at him with curiosity.

"I've never had one. Hermione has a half-Kneazle. I think I did see him play with a ball that Hermione said had catnip on it once. He seemed to enjoy himself." She just looked at him and waited. After a few seconds it hit him. "Oh..." Then his eyes went wide as he mentally pictured the results. "OH!" Harry could not stop the cringing look as he understood what she intended.

Daphne laughed without reservation now. "Sorry for the visual, Potter, but I decided that since he wanted to 'play' with it, then he should get the chance -- just without me. Now, I just need to find Mrs Norris and send her this way."

"Right." Harry could not help but gulp at the thought of what might happen. For the first time, he almost felt sorry for Malfoy -- 'almost'

being the operative word. "I guess I should go, but if I see Mrs Norris, I'll try to direct her this way."

Her charming smile came back. "Thanks! But before you go, you need to name your favor, your reward for helping me."

A blush came over him as he imaged several things he could ask for but never would. "I don't know that I need one. This memory is really nice." Then a thought came to him which caused him to frown.

"What?" she asked.

"I was just thinking what's going to happen. Eventually they'll be found and I know Snape will assume it was me. He'll start interrogating me and pull the memory from my mind." He kicked at the floor softly. "And I won't be able to stop him either."

"Because you don't know Occlumency you mean?" she queried.

Harry was not surprised she knew what Occlumency was. He would not have been surprised if all the Slytherins knew the mind skill and how to do it. "Snape was supposed to have taught me last year, but it never worked. I decided he wasn't really trying. I think he did just enough to say he was trying so he could make Dumbledore happy. Or maybe he agreed to give me 'lessons' so he could look into my mind and torture me with bad memories." He could not help looking down now; he did not want to face her after that admission of failure.

"Well, that would be a little bigger favor than what I was thinking of, but still, it wouldn't be that hard."

His head jerked up as he thought he understood her, but he dared not hope despite the smile on her face. "You mean, you would..." He could not finish it.

"Teach you Occlumency? Yes." Harry's eyes went wide. "Do understand that most of the work will be on your part. I do know it and so I can teach you. I will have a hard time testing you because I'm not a very good Legilimens, but I suspect that won't be much of a problem as my head of house will test you in class when he sees you.

How about tomorrow night at eight in the empty classroom next to the Flitwick's classroom?"

"Yeah, sure," he quickly agreed. "But what about when Snape questions me about this?"

"Don't worry. I'll take care of that." With a smile, she cast a Coloring charm as if she was painting, and wrote "RAPIST" on Malfoy's bare chest. "There, I think that will cause them to look somewhere else. And since we had Defense today, you'll have two days after your lesson tomorrow night to practice before you have to see him up close again. I think that will give you motivation to practice." She chuckled as he gulped at that thought.

"Thanks, Greengrass. I better run, though."

"No, thank you, Potter. Until tomorrow." She turned and went the other direction that he needed to go. "Here, kitty-kitty," he heard her softly calling.

Harry laughed to himself as he pulled his Cloak back up and hurried towards his Tower. As he came to the Entrance Hall, he saw Filch's cat. With an evil grin, he pounced on an opportunity before it literally got away.

He quickly cast a Silencing spell on the cat and then levitated her before she could run away. It was a good thing he had silenced her first as she appeared to be really mad based on her silent hissing and scratching the air. Fortunately, no one was around to see the floating cat. As fast as he could without tripping, he ran back down into the dungeons and into the hallway he had recently left. With the biggest of smiles, he dropped the cat on Malfoy's stomach.

The cat turned to come after him, but suddenly stopped and started sniffing the air. Harry forgotten, the cat cautiously walked down the boy and sniffed again. With its right front paw, it playfully hit the cloth containing the catnip. Harry quietly backed away and then ran once he was around the corner. He decided that he did not want to witness whatever might come next.

By the time he got to the third floor, he was breathing hard. Seeing Hermione ahead as she was returning from the library, he pulled off his Cloak and put it away as he caught up to her.

"Hermione..."

She turned. "Harry, why do you sound so out of breath?" Her eyes narrowed slightly. "Have you been stalking Malfoy again?"

His friend was both right and wrong, but it was a known excuse and one he could handle. "You know he's up to something the way he's been sneaking around." She rolled her eyes at him. "Fine, we don't know what, but I will find proof."

She rolled her eyes at him again. "Harry, you're imagining things. Malfoy's a prat, that's a given, but he's not in some conspiracy trying to kill us all."

"That's your story, not mine. I think he's up to something given how unusual he's been this year." As they reached the bottom of the long stairs that led to the Gryffindor Tower, Dean and Ginny came out of a nearby hallway to head up as well. "Dean," he nodded at his roommate first, then the boy's date. "Ginny." He wanted to smile at her or something as he felt his stomach flutter at the sight of her, but she had a boyfriend and was unavailable. For the moment, she was just his best mate's sister.

"Harry," the couple said together.

"We have to hurry," Hermione admonished them, "curfew is almost here." She led them up the stairs, Harry following her while Dean and Ginny held hands and followed Harry.

In the common room, Harry saw a number of people studying or socializing. He had no homework due tomorrow and he really wanted to think about tonight, so he told the three friends next to him good-night and went up to his dorm room. He changed for bed and drew his curtains. He really needed to think carefully.

The evening replayed itself in his mind. It was a strange evening, too. Adventure, fighting, pranking ... and a little bit of flirting too, he finally decided. That floored him. Was she flirting with him, and was he really flirting with a Slytherin? Ron would have a coronary. But then he thought about that some more...

Why not? She had been really nice to him tonight. Of course, he had saved her from a fate worse than death, or so it seemed to him. She was also quite pretty too, a lovely face and wonderful long blonde hair. Even with the bulky school robes, it was obvious she was a girl. That made him blush as he wondered what she really looked like underneath.

Pushing those thoughts aside, he thought back to past experiences with her. They had shared Potions and Magical Creatures classes for the last five years, and yet, he could only recall one thing said between them. He and Ron had been standing in the hallway waiting for Potions class one day when she came by. She had politely said, "Excuse me," and then walked between them. Thinking back to his fourth year, he could not remember her wearing a "Potter Stinks" button. Nothing else came to mind in regards to her. When it came down to it, he realized he knew nothing about Daphne Greengrass.

The real kicker was he had no way of finding out much of anything about her. It did not matter who he might ask, if he asked anyone about her, there would be all kinds of gossip. He shook his head at the injustice and rolled over. He would just have to wait to see what she was like. He would give her the benefit of the doubt and not pre-judge her; it was the right thing to do.

Suddenly, two facts came together in his brain: Ice Queen and Occlumency. Now he knew how she always kept her cool, why she seemed so aloof, why she always seemed to be in total control of herself -- she probably was. Yes, this would be a good thing for him, he needed mental control too.

With that, he did his minimal clearing of the mind, hoping it did something useful, and went to sleep. For once, there was blonde hair in his dreams, not that he remembered that the next morning.

The next morning Harry was sitting at breakfast with his favorite two friends. When the meal was done and they started walking to class, Harry looked at them and whispered. "Hey, did you notice that Malfoy was not here for breakfast?" Ron looked very interested in that observation, while Hermione rolled her eyes at him again.

"Honestly, Harry. You really need to give the conspiracy theories up. He probably just overslept," his female friend theorized.

"Maybe, but when was the last time you saw Crabbe and Goyle together without Malfoy being present?"

"Second year when we replaced them for an hour," Ron replied quickly without hesitation.

Hermione opened her mouth to refute that, but then closed it. Harry smiled, his point made that it did not happen often.

"So what do we do?" Ron asked as they continued walking to their Defense class.

"Watch closely. I'm still tracking him on the map from time to time. He was in the hospital wing when I checked this morning." Harry smirked but did not say why he thought that was. The smirk was for the thought that he would have had to drop his boxers for the school nurse and who knew who else. He hoped Malfoy was thoroughly embarrassed by that. He really was not overly worried about Malfoy's health. Harry did not think a cat could do that much damage and magic could heal most problems.

That reminded Harry of Daphne and he suddenly had an idea on how to get some info on her -- maybe. "Say, Hermione? I know you're the top student in Gryffindor for our year, and Terry Boot and Lisa Turpin probably are in Ravenclaw." She nodded. "Who're the top students in Hufflepuff?" He was going to have to sneak this in.

"Who cares..." Ron commented.

"I'm just curious. Hermione?" Harry looked at her, knowing she would know this.

"Susan Bones and Ernie MacMillan, although Hannah Abbott does quite well too."

"Right, I can see that. They all seem to apply themselves. How about in Slytherin?" Harry asked, doing his best to be casual.

Ron looked disgusted. "Who really cares?!"

"Hey, I'm just trying to be fair and I'm curious who the brains in the school are. You know, who gives our Hermione competition." Ron looked mostly mollified by Harry's statement. Hermione looked like she did not believe him, but she answered anyway.

"Tracey Davis and Daphne Greengrass, although Blaise Zabini is rumored to be smart when he tries, sort of like you, Harry." She looked at him for a moment as they came to their classroom. "You know that you're barely third in Gryffindor and you could be second if you tried harder."

"Who's second?" Ron wondered as they took their seats. Slughorn was not there yet.

"Parvati. Dean is a close fourth. You really do need to work harder, Harry," she encouraged him.

Harry wondered how she knew all this, but he decided it did not matter. He had managed to get the information he needed without arousing suspicion. Daphne was intelligent and he decided that was good.

Pulling out the "Prince's" book, Harry found a few tips on today's potion, much to Hermione's displeasure. At the end, they both received an outstanding mark. Ron's potion was too dark and too thick, so he only received partial credit.

During class, Harry would occasionally look around when all he was doing was stirring. Daphne was on the other side of the room. She did not even look at him, which was not surprising. She had never done so before. By the end of class, he had decided that made sense.

It would not do either of them any good to suddenly appear friendly towards one another.

On the way out of class, they almost bumped into each other. Daphne had the barest of smiles on her face as she looked at Harry, although she said nothing. Harry only waved his hand in an "after you" gesture, also saying nothing. Smiling to himself, he caught up to his friends and walked with them as if nothing was out of the ordinary. Back to the Tower they went for a free period before lunch.

--

The rest of the day seemed to drag for Harry, but finally dinner came and went. Grabbing his Cloak, he hurried out of the Tower after telling his friends he needed to go talk to Flitwick. He had left a few minutes early so he could do just that, in case anyone asked him if Harry had stopped by. After talking to the professor in his office about their homework assignment, he hurried on to his real meeting. Making sure no one was around, he ducked into the arranged room.

He closed the door and looked around, but he did not see her. Assuming he was the first, he started to make himself comfortable when her form shimmered into sight. She smirked at his gobsmacked look.

"You're not the only one who can go invisible," she informed him calmly.

He thought about it a moment before he asked, "Disillusionment?"

She nodded. "Not as good as your Cloak, as I can't move unseen that way, but good enough most of the time. Where did you get it anyway?"

"It was my dad's."

Daphne nodded. She turned slightly and shot a locking charm on the door and a Silencing spell on it too. "There, that should give us some privacy and at least some warning before anyone can barge in." She put her wand up and came over to sit in the chair next to his. Her long

blonde hair flowed over her left shoulder and down her front to the top of her stomach. A very serious look came over her. "Now, tell me what your previous lessons were like."

Harry dropped his head, took a deep breath, and hoped this went well. "All Snape did was tell me to clear my mind, then he would cast Legilimens at me. When he rummaged through my mind for awhile, he would withdraw and yell at me to try harder, then start again. I was able to force him out a few times, once even throwing him physically back a few steps, but mostly he just did whatever he wanted to me. Afterwards, I always had a very bad headache and usually nightmares that night." He paused for a moment before he mumbled, "I guess I'm just no good at this." He figured she would think of him as a failure.

When Daphne said nothing for nearly a minute, he finally looked up at her. The reason she had not said anything was because she was struggling to contain her fury. It was very obvious that she was very angry based on her expression and red face. He hung his head again in shame. He did so well in Defense class and flying, he did not understand why he could not do this too; but he understood why she would be angry with him.

"That -- that -- bastard!" she finally spat out. His head snapped up and looked at her. "I can't believe he did that to you, Harry. No wonder you couldn't learn, he wasn't teaching you, he was ... raping your mind. He was torturing you."

While he was happy that she was not angry at him, his worst fears were confirmed. There had been no reason for all of his pain with Snape. It was just like all the times in the greasy git's class, just more intensely. "I swear I'll kill him someday, no matter how much the Headmaster tells me he trusts him. I never will again."

"And I'll help you," she coldly told him. "I can't believe he would do that to anyone; it's against all the normal ethics of the practice." She stopped for a few seconds, closing her eyes in a very long blink and taking a slow deep breath before she continued. "All right, I'll have to start from the beginning. You need to do your best to forget everything he told you. Can you do that?"

"I think so," he told her.

Daphne closed her eyes again, took another very deep breath, and slowly released it. Her movements caught Harry's attention and he could not help but watch her chest rise and slowly fall. When he realized what he was doing, he felt flushed and closed his eyes, trying to clear his thoughts, lest he embarrass himself.

"Good," he heard her soft voice. "Keep your eyes closed and let your mind go still. You can't think of nothing for very long, therefore you must think of something. So I want you to find a memory, or really an image, of something that is very neutral, very same, very uniform, and preferably all encompassing. It can be an image of the sky, the water in the ocean if you've been there, a large table cloth that's a single color, or whatever you know and can easily pull up. Tell me when you have that."

Harry searched his memories. A school robe did not seem big enough. The sky seemed too impersonal. The lake at Hogwarts might do. Then he remembered something from his childhood -- lying in his cupboard. He would lay there with his eyes open and just experience the absolute darkness at night; he was not able to see his hand in front of his face most nights. He took that blackness and easily brought it to the front of his mind and let it sit there for a few seconds. It was easy to hold it. "OK," he finally told her.

"Very good." Her voice was still very soft. "Just think about that image, become one with it, make it you. Know it so well that anything else is wrong and you instantly know it. Anything else is a ripple, a light spot or a dark spot, it's an imperfection. Become the sameness."

Harry pulled the darkness to him letting it wash over and through him. He nodded slightly.

The voice came back from far away. "Now, I'm going to try something very gentle. When you feel the disturbance, let it push against your image so you know where it is and then wrap your image around it. Contain the imperfection in a pocket of your image and hold it here." The voice paused before it softly said, "Legilimens."

Suddenly, there was a tiny spark of light from the left side. Harry pushed the darkness towards the spot, then like a blanket, he let it wrap around the spark and the spark went away. He smiled to himself. Another spark came from his right, it was easily findable. He also wrapped it up and smothered it.

"Very good, Harry. Now come back to me, Harry. Come to my voice and open your eyes."

Slowly, the darkness faded and he felt like he was back in the room. Opening his eyes, he saw Daphne with a big smile on her face.

"Congratulations, Harry. You've successfully repelled a mental attack with Occlumency."

He hissed, "Yes!", and pumped his fist into the air. Daphne laughed. He looked at her all in smiles. "That was so much better than Snape I could hug you." As he realized what he said he turned red and looked away.

Daphne lightly laughed. "So much for the famed Gryffindor courage. Come here you big prat, I won't bite," she teased him and opened her arms.

Screwing up his courage, Harry leaned forward and gave her a light hug. He had no idea why she was doing this, but he accepted it anyway. "Thank you so much," he fiercely told her. As she patted his back a few times, he realized she was a combination of hard muscle and soft flesh. She felt very nice. Pulling away, he looked at her a little differently.

"What?" she asked.

"You're, uh, you've got a lot more muscle than I expected." He blushed again as he realized how forward that might sound.

She chuckled at him and her expression softened. "I do some exercises to stay in shape to more easily keep the boys in line. I'm not nearly as muscular as a boy, but I'm sure I'm more so than the

average girl. If you really like muscles on a girl, you should get together with Millicent." She smiled wickedly at him.

He shook his head quickly. "No thanks!"

Daphne smiled. "You're something else, Potter. I suppose I didn't know what you were really like, what with all the rumors, but you're really a nice guy underneath all the hype."

"Thanks," he had trouble looking at her. "You're pretty nice too. I didn't know what to expect and I couldn't really find out much about you other than you're smart, or at least you make good grades. You seem so above everything, but I finally worked out that was just a side-effect from knowing Occlumency."

She acknowledged that with a nod. "Very good reasoning. It's a shame we never really got to know one another sooner, you're not bad Potter."

"Harry, all my friends call me Harry."

With a tilt of her head as if thinking it through, she finally smiled at him. "And I'm Daphne. Well, let call it a night. Before next time, I want you to practice drawing that image up to the front of your mind. The more you practice the faster you'll be able to do it. Eventually, you'll do it so fast it's like it's always there for you."

"All right. How about Saturday night?" he asked.

She smirked at him. "Are you trying to ask me out on a date, Harry?"

He raised both eyebrows in surprise. "Huh? What?"

"Oh," she lightly exclaimed. "Maybe it's different in Gryffindor. In Slytherin, Saturday nights are for dating. If a boy asks a girl out on a Saturday night, it's an invitation not just a matter of studying together."

Harry's eyes went wide at that. "Uh, no, we don't do that. If it's a date, we say so, otherwise we're just getting together as friends."

Daphne nodded. "Hmm, well, I don't think I can do the evening. I do have appearances to keep up, and good job in Potions class, by the way. How about in the afternoon an hour before dinner in the empty classroom next to McGonagall's classroom?"

He thought about that. "Yeah, that should work. We'll be done with Quidditch practice by three, so let's meet at four. But why the room change?"

"It's keeps people guessing. I don't want people knowing that I'm teaching you this as I don't want them to get ideas about you and me. You're a nice guy Harry, but neither of us deserves the rumors of a Slytherin and a Gryffindor doing something together. There are also political ramifications for me in my common room."

"I agree," he said, thinking about how negatively Ron would react if he found out. "I have enough rumors about me as it is." She smiled at him. "Say, do you know what happened to Malfoy?"

A deep throaty laugh came out of Daphne. "Yes I do. Let's just say that Mrs Norris found the jackpot and Malfoy had to bare all to try and get it fixed. As I heard, he probably will be able to have children, but everything 'down there' may not be quite as good as it was before. Serves the bastard right."

Harry grinned. "Do Legilimency on me again." She looked at him quizzically. "Just do it, I have a memory to show you." She shrugged and cast the spell on him. He pushed the memory of finding Mrs Norris and taking her to Draco. When it finished, Daphne started laughing and almost fell off her chair.

"Brilliant! Totally brilliant, Harry. Stand up." He looked at her. "Come on, stand up." When he did, she gave him a much better hug. "That deserved something a little nicer than just a 'thank you', even though I do thank you."

When she let him go, Harry was blushing -- again. She had felt really nice to hold, much better than Cho.

She laughed some more. "Wow, I didn't know it would be so easy to get to you, Harry. We may have to work on that too."

Harry looked down and did his best to ignore the thoughts of more hugs from the pretty blonde. "Uh, Daphne? Can I ask one other question before we both go?" She had been pretty friendly so far, so he hoped she would.

"Sure, I may not answer; it depends on what it is."

He nodded his agreement to the condition. "You're always so in control, so with it. How did Malfoy get the jump on you? Did he attack you from behind like the coward he is?"

All the smiles left the Slytherin. "He is a coward, but it was mostly because I wasn't paying attention. He should know to leave me alone, considering how many times I've bested him in our common room. But I had just received a letter from my mother with some bad news. I was so distraught with that, I wasn't paying attention and he took advantage of me and got his wand up before I realized what was happening."

Harry sighed. "The git, I'm going to take care of him one of these days too." He shook his head at the injustice of it all. "So, Daphne? Is there anything I can do to help you with your problem? I don't mean to pry, but if I can, just ask."

She gave him an amused smile. "You're very nice, Harry. No, there's nothing you can do. My family is trying to make arrangements for me and I'm not happy about that."

"Oh, do they want you to go to a different school or some special job after you finish here?" Not having parents, he had no idea what kind of arrangements his parents might have made for him, if they were still alive.

A slightly sad smile came over her. "No, Harry. You're very sweet in your naiveté, please don't ever change."

"What?" He felt very confused.

"Arrangement for marriage, to an older wizard on the continent whom I've never met," she told him, her sadness returning.

"That's not right!" He was outraged someone would do that to their child.

"It might not be fair to me, but it is a custom still done in my family. My older sister married a man she barely knew over the Christmas holidays to help our family. My parents are trying to make an arrangement for me that will be politically advantageous for our family."

"What, like for your father to become Minister for Magic or something?" This still did not make sense to him.

"No, nothing so grandiose, Harry." She sighed. "The idea is to align ourselves with a powerful family on the continent so we have a place to escape to and avoid the war. While some people may see the Greengrass family as Dark, we avoided the last war and plan to stay neutral in this one too. That means we may have to leave England and go into hiding if it goes badly. If we do, we have to have a place that will protect us. The best way to do that is through marriage." She studied him for a moment. "You've never heard of this sort of thing before, have you?"

"No, it's all new to me. You have to remember, that even though I'm a Potter, I was raised like a Muggleborn." He stopped there not wanting to reveal more.

"That sounds like a story I'd like to hear sometime. Look, thanks for letting me, uh, vent, but we really do have to get going. Did you bring your magical cloak?" He nodded. "Put it on and then leave after I do, and go a different way. I'll see you Saturday afternoon. Be sure to study hard. You definitely need to have at least minimal shields before your class with Snape day after tomorrow."

"Right," he agreed. "Say, who taught you Occlumency," he asked as he pulled out his Invisibility Cloak.

"My father. I'll see you Saturday." She took down the privacy spells and silently left. Her normal mask had returned and she looked every bit the Ice Queen he normally saw in class.

Harry left a minute later and made it back to the Tower without running into anyone else. He pulled his cloak off before he went into the common room deep in thought. Inside, his best friend motioned him over.

"How about a game of chess, Harry?"

He gave a friendly smile to soften the blow. "Thanks, Ron, but I have too much on my mind at the moment. You'd probably win in about six moves." Ron deflated. "Cheer up, Ron. You just need to find a better partner than me. I'm rubbish at the game. If you'll excuse me, I think I'll go sit down for a bit before I go to bed." Ron nodded in understanding before looking around the room to see who else he could get to play a game with him.

Harry found a chair in front of the fire and settled into it, but not before seeing Ginny and Dean on a couch sitting very close to one another. Doing his best to ignore them and feeling in his chest at the sight of the long red hair, he turned his attention to the fire and stared into it. After a few minutes, the thought came to him that the image of the flames might be a good one to use for Occlumency. Maybe he'd try that sometime. As he brought up his image of darkness, he noticed an image of a beautiful blonde haired girl, no woman he decided, imposed itself over the image of darkness. He wondered why that happened, but he did not dwell on that. It was more interesting to dwell on the blonde rather than the why.

Eventually, he realized he was one of the last ones up. Forcing himself up off the couch, he went towards his bed, still wondering why he, a Gryffindor, was thinking of a Slytherin girl. Then it hit him that he was thinking in terms of labels, which was something he hated when applied to him. Ignoring the label, he thought about Daphne as a person. Harry decided he rather liked her interesting personality and biting wit. As he crawled into bed, he decided that he did not care what house she was in, she was a wonderful person and that was all that mattered.

Harry had been diligently practicing his clearing of the mind every spare moment he had. He was proud of himself for a small break through he had had yesterday. He had finally figured out how to find the dark blanket, as he thought of it now, and still remain "normal". The result was something like a thin black haze across his vision and slightly reduced hearing. Still, now he knew he could have something of a shield up and still know what was going on around him, unlike being blind and almost deaf the first time he had done it with Daphne.

Of course, he thought as he walked into his Defense class, he should still try to avoid looking Snape in the eyes. There was no need to tempt fate; he had only just started on learning this skill. He took his usual seat near the back of the class, Ron joined him. Daphne came in a moment later and took a seat near the front. Harry took a moment to discretely admire her hair. It was really more of a honey blonde. He wondered if it felt as silky as it looked.

Snape slammed the door closed as he walked in. Harry picked up his quill and held it ready to take notes; he also concentrated on looking at the parchment in front of him.

"Today, we will learn how to fight Vampires," the professor drawled. "If you had had a competent teacher in your third year," Harry mentally bristled at that but otherwise kept his face blank, "you should have learned that a wooden stake through the heart is the normal way to kill one. There is a spell made just for this." He waved his wand in a double counter-clockwise loop that ended in a jab, as he spoke the incantation along with the jab, something like a thick wooden arrow came out of the end and embedded itself in a straw dummy standing on the side of the room.

"Suffice to say, to kill a real vampire takes a high level of cunning and skill, which most of you do not have." Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Snape glance at him. He continued taking notes, trying not to look up. "Therefore, you must learn to cast this non-verbally if you want to have any hope of success and not become a vampire yourself." Harry heard Ron gulp. Snape Vanished the stake he had cast.

"Everyone rise," the teacher commanded and pointed to his right. "Stand on this side of the room and cast your spell into the straw dummy on the other side of the room across from you. As in real life, you are to remain silent when you cast. Except for the dunderheads in the room, this should not be hard as we covered silent casting earlier in the year." Snape looked around. "Well, what are you waiting for, move!"

Harry stood with everyone else and went to the proper side of the room. The first thing he did was to try the spell while softly saying the incantation. A thick arrow or maybe a thin stake came out of his wand and sailed across the room into the dummy across from him.

"Potter! What are you doing?!" the professor shouted.

"I just wanted to test the spell once since it is a new spell." He pulled the dark haze up in his mind.

"Ten points from Gryffindor for not following directions."

Instead of fuming at the injustice as he normally would have, Harry ignored the man and wrapped himself in the darkness, taking comfort from it. He pointed his wand at the dummy and did the spell, silently saying it in his mind, moving his lips, but not letting any sound come out. A very thin arrow came out and sailed across the room impacting the dummy across from him. Of the twenty-two dummies, one for each student, his was the only one with anything in it.

"Ten more points from Gryffindor," the man sneered. "To cast non-verbally also means to not move your lips. If your opponent can lip-read, then you are doomed, Potter."

Harry only nodded and continued on, now not moving his lips. The third cast produced a stake the thickness of the one he had cast verbally. He smiled to himself. Harry also realized that he had cast that while his dark haze was up, so maybe using Occlumency helped with spell casting. He would have to try that out later.

Suddenly, another thump was heard in the room as an arrow-like stake hit a dummy on the other end of the room. Harry looked down

the row to see who it belonged to. Daphne Greengrass had a slight smile on her face. Harry was impressed; the Slytherin had done it before Hermione had.

Fifteen minutes later, class ended. The only other person who had succeeded was Hermione, and she had only done it once.

As everyone started to leave, Snape bellowed, "Potter, stay behind!"

Harry packed his things and went up to the front of the class. He was very careful to have his Occlumency barrier up. "Yes, sir," he said in almost a monotone.

"Potter, what do you know about the attack on Malfoy?"

This was it, the test, Harry realized. He decided that the best thing to do was to try and keep his barrier up while also thinking about the story Ron had told him that morning at breakfast. He hoped that would make it look like he was trying to keep the greasy git out, while also failing a little. "Nothing, sir. I've only heard the rumors like everyone else."

Snape stared at him and Harry could see the white spots appearing here and there all over his mental barrier, but the only memory he was aware of was the one he was providing of Ron. After nearly a minute of this, Snape finally waved him off. "Go to your next class."

Harry nodded and left, careful to keep the same mental state until he was outside the classroom. After he had shut the door and let out the breath he had been holding, he heard a soft female voice next to him. "How did it go?" He jumped slightly.

"Damn it! Don't do that to me!" he hissed back. A soft chuckle came from the non-corporeal voice. He slowly walked away; a distortion in the air followed him. "I'm reasonably sure he didn't get anything out of me. Thanks for helping me," he whispered.

"Tomorrow at four," she whispered back. The distortion stopped moving. Harry smiled and kept walking. This cloak and dagger stuff was kind of fun, he decided -- just like old times.

Harry finished the Quidditch practice and raced back to his dorm room. A fast shower washed all the sweat off him. He got dressed and threw on a school robe to cover his baggy Muggle clothes. Shoving his Invisibility Cloak into an inner pocket, he left the Gryffindor Tower. He passed Ron lazily coming in from practice. Harry assumed he had stopped to talk to someone.

"Hey, mate? Where are you going in such a hurry?"

"I wanted to go for a walk before dinner," Harry replied, trying to think fast. "I'll see you at dinner." He rushed out to avoid any more questions.

He stepped into a secret passageway a moment later and put on his Invisibility Cloak. That done, he made his way to his private lesson at a more leisurely pace. A few minutes later, he was in the pre-arranged classroom. A revealing spell showed no one there, so he took a chair to wait.

It only took a few minutes for her to come in; she was visible this time. He pulled his Cloak off and cast the privacy spells.

"I'm glad you're on time," she told him. "We have to be done in an hour. I'm never late for dinner and I must keep up that appearance." He nodded. She sat down near him. "It seems that you were correct. Snape got nothing out of you, because if he had, you wouldn't be sitting here right now."

He smirked. "Duh, tell me something I don't know. That git hates me."

She inclined her head slightly in acknowledgement. "Your success gives me hope that you will fully learn this skill. How much have you been practicing."

Harry shrugged. "Don't know. Maybe three or four times a day for half an hour each?"

"Very good. Other than needing more practice, do you have any questions at this point?"

He studied her serene look. Once more he was impressed with her. "Uh, yeah, I had one the other night. I have an image that seems to work well for me, but I was wondering if I had another image, would it work any better? I guess what I'm asking is, does it matter what image you use?"

"I'm not a master at this, but I don't think it does. The only difference I've been able to determine is that some images are easier for a person to bring up. So if an image is hard for you to visualize, then you should pick a different image. Is your present one difficult?" she asked in a concerned tone.

"No, not at all," he told her. "It's easy to bring up and to use when I have to do other things."

Daphne raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

"Well, when we started, the image sort of consumed me, it was all I could think about." She nodded. "But now, I can bring it up and do other things. When I do that, I see sort of a hazy ghost, I guess, of my image over whatever I'm looking at. It's like I'm seeing the world through my barrier."

She clapped. "Excellent, Harry. That was going to be our lesson for tonight, but since you can already do that, we'll go on. Let's practice. You defend as usual, and I'll try to find images of your common room. That should be innocent enough and yet easy for me to find since you should have a lot memories of it. Ready?" She pulled her wand and waited for him to nod. "Legilimens."

Harry watched Daphne concentrate as he defended. Sure enough, there were little white spots hitting the dark haze he was looking through, just like when he had been talking to Snape. He let that go for nearly a minute, never seeing any memories. Deciding to have some fun, he did to her what he had done to Snape, except this time he thought of his second year when he and Ron used Polyjuice Potion to visit the Slytherin common room.

A surprised look came over her face before she stopped the spell.
"How do you know what the Slytherin common room looks like?"

"Yes, it worked," he said triumphantly.

"What worked?" Daphne's expression let him know he had better answer her.

"I fed you the memory I wanted you to see, not what you were looking for. I did that to Snape yesterday too. I think that's why I didn't get into trouble. He could tell I was trying to block him, but I let just enough of the memory of Ron telling me about Malfoy leak out, that he thought I hadn't stopped him." Harry was all smiles.

"Impressive, I'm not sure I've ever done that. That is probably the best technique with Snape too, assuming you have another memory that's close to what you're trying to fool him with." Her eyes narrowed slightly. "But you still did not answer my question. How do you know what the Slytherin common room looks like?"

What should he do, he asked himself. Perhaps a deal... "Do you promise that everything we share in our lessons stays between just us? You won't tell anyone what you see or I tell you, and I don't tell anyone what I see or you tell me?"

She shrugged. "Sure, that seems fair. In fact, it really needs to be that way anyway as we can slip and find out secrets." She sighed for a moment. "I probably shouldn't tell you this, but I thought I might find out some secret about you that could help me, but now that I've gotten to know you a little, I don't think I could do that." Daphne looked down as if ashamed to look at him. "You're too nice."

That confused him. It sounded like she was going to do something to him, maybe like Malfoy would have, but now she would not because she liked him or something. "What are you saying?"

Now she looked up at him. "I guess I'm saying that I respect you too much to betray your secrets. I'm sorry, Harry. I know what I said sounds bad and is not something you noble Gryffindors would do, but

it is the Slytherin way. We find out information and dirt so we can use it to our advantage."

He still was not totally sure. "You really promise to keep my secrets?" Harry studied her carefully, looking for anything that seemed false; but he came up empty.

Daphne raised her right hand. "I promise." When he accepted her pledge, she got a grin on her face. "So, Harry, when did you see the Slytherin common room?"

"My second year," he finally answered. "We wanted to know who the Heir of Slytherin was and thought Malfoy might know. So Hermione brewed some Polyjuice Potion to allow Ron and I to become Crabbe and Goyle. We found Malfoy in the halls and followed him into your common room where we talked to him and found out he didn't really know anything."

Daphne looked aghast. "That's ... that's so Slytherin! I'm impressed!"

Harry laughed. "You have no reason to have known, but the Sorting Hat wanted to put me into Slytherin."

"No, really?" She looked very surprised.

"Yeah. But I'd already met Malfoy and his sparkling personality made me want to be anywhere else but there. So I begged the Hat and it put me into Gryffindor." He shrugged like it was no big deal.

Daphne laughed, her aloofness completely forgotten. "That's priceless. That would be a fun secret to share, but I meant what I said, I'll keep your secrets, Harry."

"Thanks. By the way, I think you'll find things a lot easier if you'll drop the labels and think about the person."

"Huh?" She looked very confused.

"You've mentioned Gryffindor versus Slytherin several times today. Not all Gryffindors are alike and not all Slytherins are alike. Labeling

people and then thinking of them that way is not fair to the person and might be wrong." He now grinned at her. "If I did that, I wouldn't be here with you now."

She chuckled. "Good point. I guess I've started to do that with you too, but I hadn't really thought it through. I'll try, but so you know, some of your friends, like Weasley, make it really hard. He sees things so ... black and white."

Harry snorted. "Yeah, I know. He's a great friend once you get to know him, but he also doesn't really think things through, I've noticed."

"Enough talk. We don't have much time left. Let's practice a few times. Legilimens," she cast, trying to catch him off guard.

Only a couple small scenes of him with his friends leaked before he got his guard in place. She tired four more times, each pushing slightly harder, and never got anything else out of him. "Very good, Harry, I'm impressed. You're catching on very quickly."

He blushed at the praise. "It's because I have a good teacher. Are you trying your hardest yet?"

"No. I'm over half-way there, but I don't want to hurt you. Next time, I'll push harder still. How about next Tuesday at eight?" she suggested.

"Sorry, I have Quidditch practice until late. Wednesday?"

She thought about it. "All right, Wednesday at eight. Third floor corridor this time..."

"The one we couldn't go in our first year?" he asked with a grin.

"That one." She stood to leave.

"Daphne? If you don't mind me asking, what image do you use in your Occlumency?" He was curious about her.

She gave him an impish smile. "My family lives on a large estate where we have a large garden. So I imagine the field we have, you know, an unending expanse of ..." She paused and waited for him.

Harry groaned a few seconds later. "Green grass?" he filled in.

Daphne laughed and nodded. "Practice, practice, practice, Harry." She left the room for the Great Hall.

Harry put his Cloak on and left too. They were getting along so well together, he decided he had made a new friend. Was he being presumptuous, he suddenly wondered? He would have to ask her how she felt about being friends the next time they met.

Life went on as normal until next Wednesday evening. Harry knew he should have seen this coming, but somehow, he had not. After dinner, he had hurried with an essay for his Charms class. Since the three friends had been studying together, when he finished and started putting his stuff up, Hermione stopped him.

"Harry? Where are you going? You can't be done with all of your homework yet?" Hermione gave him a small glare. Ron was giving him a curious look, as if wondering why he was being abandoned and left alone with Hermione.

"Well, I've got everything done for tomorrow and most of my work for Friday."

She looked shocked that he had that much done. "That's unlike you, Harry. You usually put things off."

Not knowing how to pass this off, he tried for a distraction. "Yeah, well, I guess I finally started paying attention to you. It is our NEWT classes," he finished with a sheepish grin.

Hermione snorted. "And you're acting differently too. It's like you're ... more in control of yourself. You're not letting Professor Snape get to you as much."

His distraction had not worked. "I'm growing up?" he suggested.

"Harry, we're your friends. What are you up to?" She would not let it go.

He looked at his watch and noticed he did not have much extra time. He lowered his voice. "If you must know, I'm taking Occlumency lessons again and I think it's helping with my emotional control."

Hermione looked like she wanted to squeal with glee. "Harry!" He shushed her, so she lowered her voice too. "Harry, I'm so proud of you for putting your problems with Professor Snape behind you."

"I can't believe you're still studying with that bloody git," Ron told him to counter their friend's enthusiasm.

"Ron!" she complained.

"Who says I'm studying with Snape?" Harry asked casually, working hard to not laugh at her expression.

"Then who are you studying with?" she demanded.

"A far better teacher." Now he had to smile. "Sorry, I gotta go -- later." He quickly left a grinning Ron and a frowning Hermione as he went up to his dorm to put his bag up. He put his Cloak on and hurried off. If anyone noticed the portrait opening on its own, he did not hear about it.

A few minutes later, he was at the third floor corridor. He arrived just as Daphne did.

"Hi," they said together, then they laughed together.

Harry put up the privacy charms. "Say Daphne?"

"Hmm?"

"Are we friends?" He watched her to see how she reacted. To his pleasure, she immediately smiled.

"Yes, I think so, or at least I think of you as a friend now. How about you?" Her Ice Queen personality had rapidly faded into her friendly personality.

Harry nodded. "Sure, but I wanted to ask to make sure you felt that way too." He conjured two chairs and they sat down.

"Why do you ask?" she calmly queried.

"I, I just wanted to know. I got to thinking about us, you know, studying together like this, and, well," he stumbled, "I decided I liked doing this with you and wanted to know if you did too."

Daphne looked very intently at him. "I know you said not to put labels on each other, Harry, but I must say that I never envisioned having someone in Gryffindor that I would consider a friend -- maybe even a good friend if you'd let me."

"A secret good friend?"

She chuckled, "Unfortunately, yes. I do wish we could be talk to one another during normal times, but I'm not ready for that."

He nodded. "I understand and feel the same way. Can I ask you something else?"

"Sure." She pulled her wand out and laid it on her lap.

"You're not the same with me here as you are in class. Why not?"

"You mean I don't act like the bitchy Ice Queen?" she asked casually? Harry was surprised and showed it. She laughed. "Yes, I've heard that label applied to me. I don't need to," she explained. "In here with you, I can be myself. Out there with the rest of the Slytherins, I have to be ready for anything, sort of like you do."

He considered that. "That's why Snape acts like that too, when he's not sneering..."

"Yes, he blocking and controlling. You'll be like that too one day," she told him.

Harry smiled. "Actually, I've already started, even though I didn't know it. Hermione told me I was starting to act more calmly..."

"Legilimens," she suddenly cast, her wand still in her lap, although now it was pointed at him.

He saw a brief image of Hermione flash in his mind, before the dark haze came up and wrapped itself around the bright spot. Pushing mentally, the haze acted like a large sheet wrapping itself around the intrusion before it flung the light out. Harry saw Daphne be physically pushed back in her chair, her arms going wide.

Daphne took a deep breath. "Wow! Good work, Harry. I wanted to see how fast you could react. I only received the shortest of a glimpse of Hermione. I assume you were thinking about her at the time?" He nodded. "And then you pushed me out, rather forcefully too," she grinned.

Blushing slightly, Harry apologized. "Sorry about that. I guess I sort of let instinct take over."

"No apologies needed, Harry. You did the correct thing. I've just never experienced that sort of power before. Even my father has never pushed that hard." She looked at him carefully. "I think you're one of the most powerful wizards I've ever met."

Harry shook his head, not really believing her. "If you say so. But that was really a good idea, trying to surprise me. Maybe we could do that for the rest of the time. You know, just talk and let you try to get past my barrier?"

"Sure, Harry. I think you've learned enough for that. So tell me about yourself. You mentioned that you thought of yourself as Muggleborn, even though I know you come from an old Wizarding Family. Why is that?"

Embarrassment gripped him and he looked away for a moment. He wondered if he really could share this with her. Finally, he decided he could share an abbreviated version. So he started telling her about being orphaned and sent to live with his Muggle relatives who did not care about him. He also told her a little about what it was like growing up.

She hit him with another Legilimens spell during that. One brief scene of his home escaped, but it was only a picture of his bedroom and lasted for less than a second. After he explained his childhood, he asked her about hers.

Daphne smiled at him and very pleasantly told him about growing up with her parents and older sister in a comparable life of luxury. The Greengrasses were not as rich as the Malfoys, but Daphne's family was still quite well off. She told him that she was not sure who had more money, her family or the Potter estate, but she suspect it would be close. Because of Harry's surprise, she asked him what he knew about his family, and she was surprised to find out that he knew very little. So she did her best to tell him what she knew of the Potters, of them being an old Wizarding family and fairly well off, as well as some of the more important things his family had done in the past. She also hit him with Legilimens twice during this time and he managed to not give anything away both times.

She looked at her watch and stood. "You're doing very well at this, Harry," she told him with a smile.

"It's because you're a good teacher. Say Daphne?"

"Yes?"

"If I don't show up for one of our meetings, I want you to know that it's not because I've given up or don't want to be your friend any more. But, it's getting harder to hide these times from my friends. In fact, I had to tell them I was getting Occlumency lessons again, but that my teacher didn't want 'his' identity known." He looked down for a moment before looking back up at her. "I hope you understand, since you wanted this to remain between us."

Surprising him, she stepped forward and briefly hugged him. "I do understand and thank you, Harry."

Harry was happy about her understanding and her hug. Because of her hug, he decided to be brave and do something else, before he lost his courage. "I know that Valentine's Day is on Friday in a couple of weeks, but I was wanting to know if you'd like to have dinner with me on Saturday evening the fifteenth. Well, dinner and then maybe some time to talk afterwards. No studying or anything like that," he hastily added at the end. He was also having difficulty maintaining eye contact as he asked her, but he had managed -- barely.

To his good fortune, Daphne smiled. "You mean like on a date?" He nodded, unable to say anything at the moment as he held his breath while waiting on her answer. "I'm not opposed to it, but I also want to think about it. I'll tell you next time. How's that?"

He was not sure what to think about that, other than he was glad she had not said "no" yet. "OK. Fourth floor first door on the left, next to the Arithmancy classroom?"

"Until Saturday afternoon, Harry." She stood a little straighter and let the Ice Queen persona come back over her as she left.

Harry just sat back down in his chair for a few minutes. What had he done? That was so unlike him to ask a girl out, but it had felt right so he had just done it. Shaking his head at his Gryffindor impulsiveness, which he was sure would get him killed one day, he Vanished the chairs, pulled on his Cloak, and left for the Tower.

Back in Gryffindor Tower, Harry saw Ginny and Dean together over on a coach, and for the first time, he felt no monster, butterfly, or any other animal in his chest or stomach at the sight of them. In fact, he was happy for them, just like he was for any other couple that had found happiness.

It was late enough, he begged off spending more time with his friends and went to bed. Lying down, he thought about Daphne some more, trying to work out how he really felt about her. Her beauty could not be denied, but he really was not all that concerned with her looks --

they were a bonus. Just before he fell asleep, he decided that listening to his sub-conscious about Daphne had been a good thing. Even if she turned him down, he thought she would still be his friend.

((A/N: It seems that Daphne is only mentioned once in book 5, and only that she is a Slytherin fifth year. So I guess I can make her anyway I want. :-) I know a number of authors use an "Ice Queen" for a Slytherin girl; it's useful for me too.))

Chapter 2

Harry felt his time with Daphne was starting to become the highlights of his week. Even the sessions he was having with Dumbledore did not seem as exciting, although he mentally acknowledged they were probably more important. He was also having a harder time shielding his personal time from his two best friends, especially Hermione, who wanted to know more about his "extra lessons". He finally got her off his back by saying he had promised to keep his teacher's identity secret, and that he would not be happy with her for trying to find out who he was. The "slip" that his teacher was male seemed to throw Hermione off the real trail. The fact that he told them about his lessons with Dumbledore probably helped him too.

Saturday afternoon rolled around and Harry met with Daphne as usual. She was waiting for him, as he had taken a few extra minutes to get there.

"Sorry I was late. Quidditch practice ran a little long," he sheepishly explained.

Daphne quirked a smile at him. "I thought you were the captain."

He gave her an apologetic smile. "Yeah, well, we got carried away and I wasn't watching the clock. That's a bit hard when you have Bludgers whizzing around your head. Sorry..."

"No problem, but it will give us a little less time for now." Daphne reached down and picked up a bag that had been beside her chair.

That surprised him because she had never brought anything with her before. "I thought we were past the stage of needing any books for our lessons."

She fingered the bag and seemed to scrutinize it carefully before she came to a decision and she opened the bag. "I couldn't help but notice that your clothes under your robes don't seem to be your size, and after listening to your story last week, I think I understand now. Your relatives never bought you anything, did they?"

Harry was horrified; it was so embarrassing. He could not believe she was bringing this up.

Visually ignoring his reaction, she said, "I'll take the silence for a yes. So I've decided to help you, Harry, as a friend. I'd like to think that any real friend would help out if needed, at least as long as you'll let me. This doesn't mean I think any less of you now, or will think more of you later, but I want to do this as one friend to another. Will you let me help you in a small way? Please Harry?" She sat perfectly still as if afraid of his reaction, while she waited for his answer.

Harry stared at his knees for several long seconds, which seemed even longer in the absolute silence. "But, but why?" he stammered, not really able to look her in the eye at the moment.

"As I said, I'm trying to be a friend. You said we were friends, right?" He nodded. "And friends help each other. Please understand that I am not judging you by your clothes; they really don't affect our friendship. However, I do think they affect the way you see yourself, and I think new clothes will help you in ways you don't understand."

Harry was relieved she said she was not judging him by his clothes, but he was still confused. "What do you mean?" he asked, finally looking up at her and seeing a very self-assured young woman watching him.

"I'm not sure I can explain it, but I know it to be true. So I think it best if you just take my word for it," she said very carefully. "Now, I've brought some catalogs for clothes and a measuring tape so I can help you get the right size. I assume you can afford a few if I help you fill out the forms?" He nodded. "Good. Then take off your robe and I'll take a basic set of measurements, then we can find what you like in the catalogs."

"Uh, OK, but I still don't understand why you're doing this."

Again she seemed to pick her words carefully. "Because I want to help you, Harry. Because I consider you my friend. Because it seems like no one else, no even your other friends will help you in this little way, and it seems like the only way I can help you for now."

That made some sense. "But why do you want to help me?"

"Because you're my friend now," she repeated, still very calm. "Don't you help your friends? I hear you do it all the time, or at least the adventures the school hears about make it sound that way." Her look dared him to deny it.

Harry sighed. It was his 'saving people thing', as Hermione called it. "OK, and thank you." He gave in as he realized she was not going to back down and pulled off his school robe to reveal some of his cousins cast-offs.

With a smile of victory on her face, she pulled a tape measure out of her bag, as well as some parchment, ink, and a quill, and began to measure him and record the numbers. Her measuring the inseam of his trousers was a little embarrassing to him, but she managed to do it as if nothing unusual was happening.

Once she finished the measuring, she pulled out five catalogs and started going through them with him. Even with her guiding him, it took the rest of their time together to pick out jeans, shirts, and boots. Daphne also did a few pairs of socks and boxers for him, although as they dealt with his 'unmentionables', her smile threatened to break her cheery face, it was so large. Harry was very pink-faced when she wrote those parts on the order form.

Finishing the forms, she totaled the purchases, and handed them to him. "There, now you just have to send them in with the appropriate amount of money. Do you have enough or do you need a loan?"

Harry looked at the three order forms and added it all up in his head. "I think I do, although it won't leave with much until I can get to Gringotts again."

"If you need a little help for a Hogsmeade weekend, please don't hesitate to ask. I have more than I can spend from my parents, and I know you're good for it," she told him with a friendly smile.

"Thanks, thanks a lot." As he looked at her, he realized how much he appreciated her help and her friendship.

"You're wondering about the question you asked me last time, aren't you?" she softly asked.

"No, I mean yes ... What I mean is not at that moment, but yes I would like to know," he finally explained. He wanted to slap himself for sounding so stupid.

She chuckled a little. "If I said yes, where would we go and what would we do?"

A little hope surged through him. "There's this room that I know that can change itself to whatever is required. So we could go there and enjoy the time in a restaurant sort of place, and then maybe in a common room like place to talk."

Daphne considered that for a moment. "This is the room that Umbridge and her Inquisitorial Squad chased everyone from last year, isn't it?"

His mouth dropped open for a second. "You weren't on the squad, but you knew about that?"

She laughed. "It was all Malfoy could talk about in our common room at the end of the year, how he found and chased you and got you all into trouble." She gave him a genuine smile that seemed to light up her whole face. "I would enjoy dinner and conversation with you Harry. Shall I meet you on the seventh floor at half six?"

He gave her a huge grin. "I'd like that very much." Inwardly, he was doing a victory dance.

"Very well. I'll go to the Great Hall and pretend to have a small meal to keep up appearances and leave early. I would advise you to skip the entire meal so we don't appear to be doing the same thing and be seen leaving together."

"OK," he agreed happily.

"And for next Wednesday evening, how about on the sixth floor near the Astronomy classroom?"

"Sure, I'll be there." He looked down for a moment, then straight into her eyes. "Daphne, thanks again for helping me with getting some new clothes. We can burn these next time."

"If you like. I can see where it might make you feel better. Until next time, Harry." Her public mask came over her as she left.

Harry went to dinner a few minutes later. As he started to eat with his friends, a thought came to him. He quickly finished dinner and left before anyone could stop him. It did not take long for him to get to his dorm room since he ran the entire way. Searching through his trunk, he quickly found his money bag, which also had his Gringotts key. Taking both of those, he ran down to the kitchens.

He was almost bowled over by Dobby before the door was closed behind him.

"Harry Potter, Sir! Dobby is most pleased you came to see me. What can I help you with?"

Harry squatted down to be on Dobby's level. "Dobby, I need a few errands run since I can't leave the school. Is it possible for you help me by going yourself?"

"Oh, yes Sir! Dobby would be proud to run the great Harry Potter's errands. What is Harry Potter needing?" The little elf was so happy his large ears were flapping as he nodded his acceptance.

With a smile, Harry pulled everything out. "Here is my money bag and Gringotts vault key. If the goblins will let you, please take out 100 Galleons. If they don't, there should be enough money in my bag for all my purchases, but there won't be much left over."

"Don't worry, Harry Potter, Sir. Dobby can do that. Dobby used to go to bank a lot for old master. As long as I have your key, I can do it."

"Excellent," Harry said with a smile and pulled out the order forms. "Here are three orders for clothes, everything is marked. You just have to go to each store and give them the form and the right amount of money, and bring it all home."

"Yes Sir! Dobby can do that. I'll bring them to your bed soon." Dobby took it all from Harry and left with a loud pop.

Harry smiled to himself and left. Back up in Gryffindor Tower, he played some chess with Ron and then sat around and talked to various people. It was a nice relaxing night. When he went up to go to bed, he found a small mountain of packages on his bed, along with a money bag that was bulging and also had his vault key. Harry was amazed that Dobby had done all of that so quickly, but he was thankful.

The next morning, for the first time ever, he put on clothes that fit. Looking in the mirror, he saw a person he had never seen before. Harry decided that the boy had a nice look about him, even if he did say so himself, he thought with a smirk. The mirror seemed to agree with him as it told him, "Very dashing."

Harry walked to breakfast and received a lot of looks, including a long one from Ginny. Harry just smiled at her and kept going.

Hermione seemed to make the biggest deal of it. "Harry, where did you get those clothes? They really look good on you."

"Oh, no big deal. I ordered them from a catalog," he replied.

"I've never seen you really care before. Why now?" she asked.

"Why not? Everyone else has decent clothes. Why shouldn't I?" It was so simple, and yet such a revelation to him. He suddenly thought he understood what Daphne had been trying to say to him. It was like he was a new person. The new clothes did not make him any better, but they did make him feel better about himself. He also began to wonder why no one had ever pointed this out to him before. All of his professors, the Weasleys, Sirius, Remus, and the rest of the Order had all seen him dress in his cousin's clothes; and yet, none of them

had ever tried to help him. Did they think he liked dressing like that? It was something to consider later.

"There's no reason you shouldn't." She shrugged. "I guess we all just thought you liked it that way."

Unbelievable, he thought. Working to hold his sarcasm in, he asked, "Why would you think that?"

"You mean you didn't like that?" she asked. He shook his head. "Oh, well I thought that because I know some people like the 'grunge' look, and I thought you were one of them. You never said anything before."

"I never said anything because I never had the chance to do anything about it," he said slightly heatedly. "If someone had asked, I would have gladly gone shopping for new clothes."

Hermione looked taken aback. "I'm sorry, Harry, I didn't know." She sounded truly apologetic. "Maybe you can come shopping with my family this summer. You'll need to change some of your Galleons into Pounds, of course."

Most of Harry's anger left him. She did look truly sorry and she had a valid point that he had never asked. "Thanks, I might do that. And, sorry, I didn't mean to snap at you. It's just, always been a bit of sore spot for me."

"I'm really sorry then, Harry." She looked over at Ron, but he had not been paying attention to the conversation. Instead he was talking to Lavender.

Harry nodded, accepting her apology for what it was. "I've got a few things to go do. I'll see you later." Harry got up and started to go back to his dorm room. As he went into the Entrance Hall, he saw Daphne going in to eat. She looked at him and raised one neatly manicured eyebrow while she looked him over, and then she smiled since no one else was there. "Nice," was all she said.

As she walked by him, he whispered, "Third floor corridor, one hour." She nodded and continued on.

An hour later, Harry used one giant Incendio to reduce all of his old clothes to ash. Daphne smiled at the new more self-assured Harry. He surprised her with a hug and left first for once. It took Daphne several minutes to fully raise her Occlumency barriers and assume her public mask. There was something about being hugged by the 'new Harry' that was thrilling.

On Valentines Day, Harry was up early with two letters in his hand. He snuck up to the owlery under his Invisibility Cloak. After he removed his cloak, Hedwig flew down to him. He briefly petted and praised her before he tied the first letter onto her leg. He watched her fly off to Moony with a "Hello" letter. He had to send Hedwig off first lest she become jealous for not being able to deliver this letter too. After she was far enough away that she was hard to see, Harry looked up and motioned a school owl down. He tied the second letter onto its leg.

"Do me a favor, please. Go sit on your perch for an hour or so until it's time for the normal mail delivery, then deliver this to Daphne Greengrass. Can you do that for me?" He had no idea if this owl was as smart as Hedwig, but he could not let Hedwig deliver this letter; she was too well known. The owl hooted once, so hoping that meant "yes", Harry gave it an owl treat before it flew back up into its perch. Hoping for the best, he went back under his Cloak.

Harry waited in the common room for a short while, until his friends came down too. Because Ron was still going with Lavender, he walked with Hermione behind Ron and his new girlfriend. While Ron talked with Lavender, Hermione watched the two and sighed. It was big enough Harry could not miss it.

"What's wrong?" he asked in a soft voice.

Hermione looked at him for a moment, as if judging him. She also slowed her walk, so Harry slowed with her. "Harry, would you honestly answer me one question?"

"Just one?" he joked.

She rolled her eyes at him before she playfully said, "Just one for now." He laughed, but she grew serious. "Harry, do you think Ron will ever ... notice me, like he does Lavender?"

All thoughts of joking fled from him. "You mean, like..."

"Yeah..." They had been friends long enough that she was sure they were talking about the same thing.

Harry gave that some thought as they continued to slowly walk. He thought about how much they fought, what they were like when they were not fighting. As they neared the Entrance Hall, he looked at her and saw how nervous she was. He wanted to lie to her and tell her everything will work out just as she wanted it to, but she was his best friend and she had asked for honesty. "I don't know, Hermione; but if he does, it won't be anytime soon." She hung her head and Harry thought he saw a single tear going down her cheek. "Can I give you some advice?"

She nodded and wiped a hand over her eyes.

"I once wondered about a girl, but she wasn't available at the time and a friend told me that she had once had a crush on me, but the girl was over me now. So I took a deep breath and went on with life, deciding that if it was meant to be, it would happen in its own time." He stopped her with a hand on her shoulder just before they walked into the Great Hall. "Live life and enjoy it as it is now. If it's meant to be, it will happen when it happens."

Hermione looked at him for a short moment before she threw her arms around him in a tight hug. "Thanks, Harry," she whispered in his ear. "You really are my best friend." He squeezed her back and let go. They walked into the Great Hall and took their usual seats.

Harry had barely started breakfast when the flock of morning owls came flying in. Out of the corner of his eye, he watched Daphne and was pleased to see the owl he had given her letter to make an appearance in front of her. It was not much, just a short note saying

Happy Valentine's Day and that he was looking forward to their date. Just to be safe, he had not signed it. She would know who it was from.

To Harry's surprise, a dark brown owl landed in front of him. His friends watched as he pulled the letter off and gave a piece of bacon to the bird. It flew off as he opened the letter with his name on it.

Dear Harry,

Happy Valentines Day! I'll tell you more later, but I wanted to thank you for your friendship. I don't have many friends, so I value all the ones I do have. I consider you a good friend.

I'm looking forward to our dinner.

Your new friend

Harry could not help but smile to himself. They had thought of the same thing. He briefly looked up in her direction and saw her smile, to be quickly replaced by her normal mask. He flashed a big smile before he looked back down and folded the letter.

"Who was it from?"

It was no surprise that Hermione would want to know. He looked up and saw simple curiosity on her face. At least she was not concerned at his safety. But how to answer was difficult.

With an easy going smile, he said, "It's from my Occlumency teacher, wishing me a nice day."

Ron had been looking at him too and nodded before returning to wolfing down his breakfast. Hermione seemed to be thinking something through as she looked at him, still with curiosity, but she did not say anything.

It was helpful that Harry was in a good mood, as Snape was not. Harry lost forty points in class that morning.

After Quidditch practice the next day, for once, Harry took his time cleaning up. When it was time for dinner, he sent his friends on ahead, saying he had something else to do first and he would join them back in the common room later. Hermione did her best to find out what, but Harry told her it was personal. After more badgering, Harry finally relented and agreed to tell her later, but he also made it clear that when was up him and might not be until summer. Hermione was put out at that but finally left.

With his friends gone, he went back up to his room and stripped off his T-shirt and donned a dark green pull-over shirt that Daphne had seemed to like when they were picking out clothes. He thought that went well with his tight black jeans and new boots. Grabbing his special Map and Cloak, he left for his date, making sure he would not run into anyone and that no one could see him.

His first stop was the kitchens. It was a busy place before dinner, but it seemed to be settling down now that most of the food had been sent up. Harry had been there less than five seconds before Dobby showed up.

"Harry Potter, Sir! What can Dobby do for you?" the excited little elf asked.

"Hello, Dobby," he greeted the elf as he squatted down. "Dobby, I have a special dinner date tonight in the Room of Requirement that you told me about. And I was wondering if you could bring a nice dinner for two up there at a little after seven?"

"Yes, Sir! Dobby can do that easily! Dobby bring you an excellent dinner. Harry Potter, Sir, and Slytherin girl will like it very much."

Harry could not help but blink in surprise. "You know who I'll be with? This is very important, who else knows, Dobby?" He was very concerned about their secret getting out.

"Only the elves, Sir! We see many things. Some things we tell Headmaster, but not things like this, and never secret things of Harry

Potter. Dobby keeps Harry Potter's secrets and makes other elves do it too." The little elf seemed very pleased with himself.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Harry patted the little guy on his shoulder. "Thank you for keeping my secrets, Dobby. You're a good elf."

Dobby beamed. "I be bringing a special meal for you and your mistress, Sir. Go make room nice for dinner and Dobby will do the rest."

Harry could not help but smile. "Thank you again, Dobby. I'm sure it will be excellent." He rose and headed towards his dinner destination. He had plenty of time, so he watched the Map to make sure he did not run into anyone. He also saw Daphne in the Great Hall sitting next to Tracey Davis and Blaise Zabini.

Arriving on the seventh floor, he paced in front of the tapestry and thought of a romantic dinner setting. The door appeared so he went in. It was everything he could have dreamed of. A very visually warm place that instantly felt cozy, soft music, and no one else there. There was even a hint of flowery fragrance in the air. Looking around, he noticed a door in the back and went to check it out. In that room was a two person overstuffed leather couch in front of small fire. Again, the colors and decorations just felt cozy and romantic. He was also happy that there was not a piece of lace in sight. Taking a seat at the table, he watched Daphne's label on his Marauder's Map.

Half an hour later, her label left the table. A few minutes after that, she was getting close to the seventh floor, so Harry went over to the door and opened it. He saw her coming around the corner. She smiled at him as she approached. He let her in, closed the door, and then thought of the door hiding itself so no one knew they were in there. To his pleasant surprise, the door turned into a solid archway with no door visible at all.

"I'm glad you could make it," he politely told her, a little nervous now that she was here.

"Thank you for the invitation, kind sir," she told him with an impish smile. She opened the front of her school robes and shrugged them

off to reveal an emerald green dress that accentuated her figure very nicely, Harry thought. It had thin straps that showed bare shoulders before going across a very ample chest, yet showing only a hint of cleavage. The waist and hips were tight, showing a nice figure down there too, before flaring to wide skirt ending at the knees. Harry thought the bottom half of her legs were very shapely.

"Wow! You're beautiful! I thought you were nice looking before, but this ..." Harry turned red as he considered what he had just blurted out.

Fortunately for him, Daphne laughed. "Thank you, Harry. I prefer honest opinions and truth. And I must say, you look very nice yourself -- very manly, in fact." Harry blushed even more.

Once he got control of his tongue back, he said, "Would you join me for dinner fair lady?"

"Certainly sir," she replied in the same semi-teasing vein. She grabbed his arm and let him escort her across the room.

Harry pulled her chair out and seated her. As he took his seat, food magically appeared on the table. They had fish, vegetables, a fruit cup, bread, and a glass of what looked like wine and one of water.

Daphne tilted her head as she acknowledged the meal. "I'm impressed, Harry. This looks like something a Slytherin would arrange." She picked up her napkin, placed it in her lap, and started to eat, all the while watching him carefully.

For once, he did not blush. "Thank you, I'll take that as a compliment. All I can say is that I have a very good friend who is better to me than I deserve, and he arranged for most of this."

"Very tasty," she told him after trying the fish. "It was a compliment, Harry. To me, this shows cunning and ambition. Do you have that?"

He thought about it as he had another bite. "I do, but I suppose it depends on if we're discussing the same goal." He wondered what she was really asking.

She took a drink. "Real wine? I'm doubly impressed. I thought only the teachers got this."

Harry shrugged. "I thought so too, but like I said, he's a very good friend with many special abilities." He tried a sip of the wine and decided that it was not bad, although it would not be his favorite drink. "What do you think my goal is?"

A chagrinned look came over her. "No fair, I was supposed to ask you first."

"Why?" He could tell he was missing something obvious.

"Because the first person to answer this sort of question is usually at a disadvantage. Didn't you know that?" she smirked.

Now he understood. "No, but you're avoiding the question," he pointed out, enjoying the gentle verbal sparring.

Daphne seemed to struggle mentally as she ate some more. "All right, I think your goal is me."

Harry started to choke as he was not sure which way he should take that. Drinking some water, he managed to get himself back under control. "Excuse me?"

She laughed. "What? Was I too direct? Your goal is to get me, make me your girlfriend. If you were Slytherin, I'd say your goal was to get me into bed, but you're a Gryffindor, so you're probably too noble for that." He started to object, but she stopped him. "And I mean those labels in their moral sense, not in their house sense, because I know you don't like that. However, you must admit that most Slytherins tend to act in the same way, as do most Gryffindors, so most people stick with the label and paint everyone the same way. You are mostly Gryffindor in idealism, but overall you are more, Harry, much more."

He had calmed down as he listened to her, and he thought about what she said. He used his food to give him time to think without it being overly obvious. "Your explanation is well thought out."

"And my guess at your goal?" A teasing look had come back to her, but it was obvious she did care about the answer.

Deciding that his answer could make or break the date, he went for full honesty. "You're close. My goal was to spend some time with you as a friend and not studying, to see if there was anything special between us. We've worked well together and we seem to get along so far. I've found a friend in someone I would not have imagined before. I guess I want to know if more could happen, or if we'll just stay friends." He hoped he had not just ruined everything.

Her eyes bored into his and he purposefully did not raise his barrier. He felt a little pressure and did his best to welcome it. He saw a few scenes and memories come up, all of her. She did not dig, she just requested his thoughts of her and he freely gave them. Finally, she blinked and pulled back.

Daphne toyed with her wine glass, swirling the little bit of remaining liquid. "You really care for me." It was not a question so Harry let it stand. "You're as noble as they say, maybe more so." She looked at him a moment longer and then softly laughed.

"What?"

It was a long laugh and it slightly annoyed him.

"Harry, you really don't know how most of the girls in the school think of you, do you?" She gave him a very curious look that he had trouble interpreting.

"No, and I don't really care. But why do you ask?"

She shook her head slightly and chuckled once more. "Because it matters." He gave her an 'explain' look. With a smile, she launched into it.

"Harry, I find it most amusing that the vast majority of girls in the castle would do almost anything to be your girlfriend, and many of them would do anything, including going to bed with you." He was

shocked, truly shocked, which made her smile all the more. "Your friend Ginny Weasley would be a good example of that, at least until this last year. I think she's finally growing up and seeing you as a real friend, but for the most part, you could have had her as a girlfriend and done anything you wanted if you had only asked her."

"I don't think she's like that, she has morals," he objected.

"True, and I didn't say you would not have had to work hard to get her to ignore them, but I think she eventually would have if you had asked persistently. Many of the girls in the school would not have been as hard to convince, but I used her as the typical 'fan-girl' because you know her. Before your date to the Yule Ball in our fourth year, Parvati would have been in this category."

He was not sure whether to believe her or not, but he stopped trying to object.

"There are a very few girls who are not that way; your friend Hermione, for example. Would it be fair to say you think of her like a sister, or maybe a cousin?"

"Yeah," he said after some consideration.

"Then there are a few girls that acknowledge that you are a special person, even nice to look at," she gave him a brief 'hungry' look, "but don't try for you because they consider you unobtainable."

"Huh?" This was confusing to him.

"What's not to understand, Harry? You are a special person, so for some girls, they think they are not good enough to attract your attention and keep you. Hannah Abbot and most of the Hufflepuff girls are like this. Others of us, myself included, understand there is a gap between us that can not be bridged, so we don't even try. But now..." She smiled and waited for him to cotton on.

Harry thought that through. "You're saying, that by becoming a friend, I've allowed you to cross that gap?"

"Very good, Harry. That allows me to join another very small and select group of girls. There are some who see you not as The Boy-Who-Lived, but as Harry Potter, sixth year Gryffindor. The pedestal this group puts you on is very short. We recognize you're special, but we won't treat you any differently than we would any other guy. If Hermione cared about you as a potential boyfriend, she would be in this group instead of the other one. I think Ginny is starting to move from the 'fan-girl group' to this group, as I think she'd still date you if she had the chance."

"So you see me as just another guy?"

"Pretty much. I do admit you are special, whether you like it or not. Many people make it so and you don't have a choice; I acknowledge society's point, even if I don't agree with it."

"Why not?" This was really fascinating to him.

"Your first special act was when you were one year old. I appreciate what you did as much as everyone else, but I really don't think you did anything; you were only one for Merlin's sake. Babies can't really work magic. After you got here at Hogwarts, you've been in a number of scrapes and managed to survive. Some people like Malfoy would say it was all luck, but now that I've gotten to know you a little, while I'm sure luck helped, I think it was more you being a powerful wizard for your age and picking helpful friends. Most of us aren't like that, so that makes you special."

Harry snorted. "I think it's mostly luck. Stuff just happened at the right time, that's all."

"Sure, that's luck, but taking the opportunity when it comes and doing the right thing is not luck, Harry, that's skill and strength of character - that's also ambition."

"That also has gotten two people killed and others hurt very badly," he pointed out.

She shrugged. "You're fighting for your life. We're in a war. It happens. Get over it and go on."

"I can't just 'get over it and go on' as you so blithely put it," he said heatedly, as he began to wonder about where her attitude came from.

"Sure you can, because if you don't, you'll get yourself and all of your friends killed," she calmly stated, not reacting to his small burst of temper. That logic shut him up. "Harry, what I'm trying to tell you is that accidents happen. Learn from your mistakes and go on. Dwelling on them only hurts you and others. I'm not so cold as to tell you to forget about them, but don't let those mistakes get you down and prevent you from doing what you need to do. Use those mistakes to motivate you to do better. I know that's probably more Slytherin than Gryffindor, but you're in a war, and if you're going to be around me, you need to look at life a little more realistically."

Harry sat up straighter as he heard the last part. "Be with you?" He wondered if she really meant that the way he thought she did.

"Did you or did you not want me as your girlfriend?" she challenged him with an impish smile on her face.

"Yes," he said with no hesitation.

Daphne's big smile came back out. "Good! But do know that I have some conditions. We're going to have to hide this for a while. I don't know how long, but I do know it's not safe for you to have an open girlfriend. If something happens and I have to publically expose my status to save you, I will, but I want this to be a secret for at least this year."

"All right," he agreed. "That's probably for the best, for both of us. You're safer and I feel less guilty about making someone a target."

"That leads me to condition number two. You're going to have to listen to me on some things. We're going to sit down and talk about how you see various things and feel about them -- like your past mistakes. I will do my best to help you see them realistically. I won't ignore your feelings, but you have to promise to let me help you put them into their proper perspective. You need to be able to function well. I have a feeling more bad things will happen to you."

"You got that right," he muttered.

"Huh?" She obviously wanted to know what he meant by that.

He took a deep breath and exhaled as he thought about what to say. Trying to postpone it a little more, he stood up. "Shall we go into the other room? We're both done eating and it will be more comfortable in there. Maybe there will even be some chilled Butterbeers if we're lucky."

With a smile, she joined him and held onto his arm again, walking with him to the back room. She let out a surprised noise when she saw it. "What a nice place to talk." There was a small table there with a vase and two roses as well as a chest on top. Harry opened it and saw six Butterbeer bottles on ice. Smiling, he pulled one out, opened it and handed it to her, before he got one for himself.

"I am going to have to do something very nice for Dobby," he said with a sigh after a long drink.

"Why would you care about Malfoy's house-elf?" she asked.

"Dobby is no longer their house-elf. I tricked his father into freeing Dobby at the end of my second year. He's been here working at the school ever since. He's always very eager to help me whenever I ask," Harry explained.

Daphne grinned at him. "Nice one. I knew something had happened because of the way Malfoy went on about the elf, which is how I knew his name, but I didn't know what. Now, it seemed you agreed with my guess about more bad things happening to you. Besides the Daily Prophet calling you the Chosen One, why do you think so?"

Harry was in a real quandary now. How much should he share with her? She was his friend and now girlfriend, but how far could he really trust her? He supposed a general overview would not hurt. So he started telling her about what it was like in school, all of their adventures in more detail than most people ever heard. He was careful not to tell her Ginny's name when he mentioned the diary, but

otherwise, he told her about everything else. He was also very careful not to tell her about the prophecy, not even that it existed.

"So you see, he keeps coming after me, and I see no reason for that to change, no matter how much I would like it to," he concluded.

She thought about that very carefully as she finished her second Butterbeer. "And you don't know why, you just have this trend?"

Now what, he thought. Maybe there was a middle position. "I, uh, I know why Voldemort thinks he has to kill me, even if I don't believe it's true, but I'm sorry, I can't tell you. Professor Dumbledore told me not to tell. Besides, it's safer for you that way."

"I see," she drawled, deep in thought.

He offered her another bottle, but she declined.

"Reading between the lines, then you really are the Chosen One and you have an ugly task in front of you." Harry willed himself not to react. "Don't worry, I won't tell anyone, but I need to think about this. You've had three Gryffindors thinking about this; I believe you need at least one Slytherin too, for a different perspective."

Harry chuckled. "Sure, why not? It can't hurt to have someone else thinking about how I can take Voldemort out." He was pleased to see that she did not react to the Dark Wizard's name.

"That's the spirit, Harry. Now, I'm afraid we have to leave; curfew is approaching. I must thank you for a most unusual date." She stood up and he followed.

"Oh, I'm sorry." He looked down, not believing how badly he had done; but then, he had so little experience.

"Harry, no, don't feel bad, please. It's unusual because I've really enjoyed it and I didn't have to fight to keep your hands off of me," she told him with a grin. "This has been the best dinner I've ever had here at school. And the company and conversation have been wonderful. I've truly enjoyed not having to defend myself and my honor."

"Really?" She liked it?

"Yes, really," she told him as she took the one step that separated them and put her arms around his shoulders.

Harry automatically put his hands on her waist and gently pulled her to him. He was not sure if their chests or their lips touched first, but her lips commanded his attention. She deepened the kiss and he went along. A few long moments later, they broke apart, each with a large goofy grin on their face.

"Brilliant..."

"Lovely..."

Their lips met again and Harry's hands went around her back and pulled her closer.

"That really was brilliant," Harry told her when they separated again.

"Thank you, Harry. You're a good kisser too." She sighed. "I wished we didn't have to hide this."

"Me too." He stepped back and grabbed her hand, pulling her to where the door should be. He also pulled out his Map and said the magic phrase.

"What's that?" she asked.

"This is the Marauder's Map. My father and some of his friends made it. I'm just checking to make sure no one is out in the hall."

"Now that is brilliant," she told him. "Look, there's Snape prowling the dungeons. That's why we never meet down there."

"I assumed. Well, it's clear up here. If you hurry, you'll make it back before curfew." He blanked the Map and put it away. "Thanks, Daphne, for everything." He gave her a quick kiss.

"Thanks for asking me, Harry. Wednesday night at eight, second floor and second door on the right," she suggested.

"Right." He gave her another quick kiss and then opened the door that had appeared. They both wasted no time in getting back.

Harry should not have been surprised after his earlier conversation, but when he returned, he received the attention of almost every girl still in the common room, and especially of one Romilda Vane.

"Where have you been?" Hermione asked, sitting in a chair reading.

He did not want to answer that, especially with so many people paying attention to him.

"Out, thinking about what I want to do some day." He did not want to have to lie to her, but he felt he had no choice at the moment.

"Dressed like that?"

Harry looked down at his clothes. "What? A guy can't get a little dressed up to feel good about himself once in a while?" With her momentarily speechless, he said good-night and ran up to his dorm room to escape and think. It had been a wonderful evening with a wonderful girl with a wonderful ending. The kiss with Daphne was nothing like the one with Cho. The one with Daphne left the promise of many more wonderful things to come.

Harry worked diligently to keep up with all of his homework and Quidditch practices. He leaned on Ron for help with the practices, which Ron enjoyed and it gave the two friends a little more time together. That was good for Ron too because it seemed that Ron and Lavender were not on the best of terms any more, even though they had not broken up yet.

The time from Saturday to Wednesday seemed to drag for Harry. Wednesdays and Saturdays when he had time alone with Daphne were now the highlights of his week. Finally, Wednesday came and he hurried off under his Invisibility Cloak to meet her on the second floor. She was already there when he arrived.

"Hi Daphne," he breathed as he walked up to her. He felt a little shy, but that did not stop him from giving her a tentative kiss.

"You can do better than that, Harry," she pouted slightly.

So Harry put his arms around her and kissed her like he had on Saturday. When he pulled back, she had a large smile on her face. "That's how to kiss me," she informed him in a dreamy voice. "The other kinds of kisses are only for when you are rushing off somewhere and don't have time for one of those."

"Yes, Miss Greengrass," he teased.

"And don't you forget to always obey too," she jokingly returned. Daphne cast the privacy spells while Harry conjured a small couch. "You seem to have Occlumency down reasonably well. Practice will make you better, but I don't think I know Legilimency well enough to take you further. So for you, it will be trial by fire."

"I understand." Snape would be his fire, he knew.

"However, it would not hurt for you to know Legilimency as well, so I thought I'd teach you that. It will be useful for when you need to know if someone is telling you the truth, as well as if you find yourself in a situation where you have to interrogate an enemy. There is a strict code of ethics in using it due to its ability to invade someone's privacy. Of course, as you've found out, it's not always followed."

"Snape," he hissed.

"Exactly. One day, he will meet someone who knows Occlumency well enough and who is magically powerful enough, that he will find out the hard way not to do that."

Harry gave her a slightly evil smile. "I do hope that's me, some day."

"Perhaps," she conceded, "however, do be careful. He is better than he lets on." She sat a little straighter as she launched into her lesson. "For Legilimency, you need to focus your mind instead of trying to

clear it. Focus on the person, on seeing through his eyes as if you're trying to see into his brain; try to make a mental connection with them as you say the spell. If you can do that, you can see their thoughts as well as detect most of their emotions."

"That's all there is to it?" He thought there would be more.

"That's it in a nutshell. There are two kinds of Legilimency: active and passive. I've described passive, which allows you to see their current thoughts. If done skillfully, the victim may never even know you're doing it, if you can do the spell non-verbally and wandlessly, like a master of the art can. And so you know, I would consider Snape and Dumbledore good enough to be a master, so you must always be on your guard against them. Active Legilimency allows you to force memories to the surface and you can even search for a specific one or for memories on a topic. As you know, the victim can see them too, so there is no stealth in this. This is the mode you'd use in interrogation if you were an Auror or fighting someone. Of course, dealing with Occlumency shields adds another complication, but we'll deal with that later. Understand?"

"Yeah, I think so. I guess I'll just need to do it."

"Right. I'll concentrate on a memory and you cast the spell on me and tell me what memory I'm thinking of." She calmly sat there waiting on him.

Harry took a deep breath and cast "Legilimens." He was staring into her very beautiful sky blue eyes and thinking of her. Nothing happened.

"Try again, Harry," she gently commanded him. "Try to establish a mental connection with me."

He blushed slightly. "I think I forgot that part. You have very pretty eyes."

Now she blushed slightly. "Thank you, Harry. That will get you a kiss later, but for now, you need to concentrate on your lesson."

Harry tried again, this time with some success.

"I got a flash of something, I think it was a room, but I'm not sure."

"That was part of it," she confirmed. "Try again."

It took another ten minutes before Harry was good enough to see the Room of Requirement with them in it on their first date. She gave him a kiss for his success. Harry tried again, this time it took only two times before he saw her and Tracey Davis studying in the Slytherin common room.

"So you study with Tracey?"

She nodded. "That's how we usually spend Saturday nights. Neither of us really wants to date any of the Slytherin boys, and no one from any of the other houses asks us out." She quietly sighed. "You are lucky that you can date from three of the houses."

"True," he agreed. "That's one of the things wrong in the school. I don't understand how we have such a split between the houses. It's social suicide for me to hang around with Slytherins, not to mention outright dangerous with someone like Malfoy around."

"I know. Listen to the Sorting Hat. I think it's sung about unity for the entire time I've been here." Daphne shook her head at the situation. "I think a lot of the blame can be laid at Snape's feet. He would personally ostracize any one of us who dated a non-Slytherin. Some of the blame can also be given to Dumbledore, who won't rein in Snape's excesses."

Harry chuckled. "I never thought I'd hear a Slytherin bad mouth Snape."

She grinned. "I guess you don't know us all that well then. We wouldn't ever say it to his face, but most of us can see the truth." She looked at her watch. "We only have a few more minutes left."

"Perhaps we could spend them as boyfriend and girlfriend?" Harry suggested and moved closer to her on the couch.

"You could talk me into that." Daphne's arms went around Harry's shoulders as her lips met his.

They left the room five minutes later than they had planned, but there was still plenty of time before curfew. From Harry's point of view, their relationship was going very well. Not only was the kissing great, but they were becoming better friends, even if they did have to keep their relationship hidden.

As April arrived, Harry was having some new problems. His relationship with Daphne was going very well, but his time with Dumbledore was not. He was frustrated with the old man because Dumbledore was still not teaching him any advanced magic. All they did was look at memories of Tom Riddle. While useful, they did not help Harry figure out how to kill him. It was also going badly because Dumbledore had told him that unless he, Harry, convinced Professor Slughorn to give up a memory about a young Tom Riddle, that they had nothing else to discuss on the matter.

On the first Saturday in April, Harry and Daphne had another dinner together in the Room of Requirement. It was once again an excellent culinary experience thanks to Dobby. Their after dinner conversation went well until Daphne asked him about his meetings with Dumbledore. He had told her about them the previous week, and how the Headmaster was trying to teach him about the history of Voldemort.

In their conversation, Daphne confronted him.

"Harry, what's wrong? You're not as relaxed as you normally are with me." He did not answer for a moment. "Harry? Answer me please. We need to be open with each other."

He slowly nodded. "I know," he finally verbalized. "But you do know that I have some secrets I can't share. Some no one can know because they could get you killed."

She thought about that for a moment. "All right, I'll let those slide for now. As we get to know one another better and trust each other more,

I think you can find that you can share those with me too. I will keep your secrets, Harry."

A shrug was all she got for a moment. "Maybe some day."

"So are your problems one of those dark secrets?"

"No, I guess not. One of my problems is Dumbledore. He says I have to get a memory from Slughorn if he's to help me anymore."

"I see." She considered that. "I take you don't know how to convince him?"

"No. I've tried the direct approach and he's avoiding me now."

Daphne smiled at him. "Then you need a more indirect way, a more cunning way, especially since you're dealing with a Slytherin. You need to let your inner Slytherin out, Harry." She smiled brightly at him and he chuckled. She seemed to know how to cheer him up.

"OK, I probably deserved that for being so down," he said seriously, "and you have a point. I need to be sneaky about it."

"I said cunning, but if you need sneaky, do it cunningly," she joked. "What else is bothering you?"

Harry looked down. "You might be able to help me with this one, but I haven't wanted to ask you."

"Why not? The worst I can do is say no. Well, I might hex you too if you're too forward, but I doubt that is the issue."

He vigorously shook his head as he clearly understood her reference. "No! Not at all!"

"Then what is it?" she asked with real caring in her voice.

A sigh escaped him. "I need to know what Malfoy is up to. I've caught him sneaking around and he's been very out of character for him this year. I know he's up to something and I need to figure out what."

She nodded as she listened. "Perhaps I can help. I'll keep my ears open. You feel this is important?"

"Yes," he said without hesitation. "I think he's been marked as a Death Eater too, so that would also be good to know, as I can use that to get him expelled. That would make it safer for all of us, assuming I can get the Headmaster to act."

"You don't think Dumbledore cares?" She seemed surprised at this.

"Actually, I think he knows, but he's letting Snape handle it. The problem there is that I don't trust Snape," he emphatically said.

"Very wise of you. I'll see what I can find out for you." She paused to consider something. "Harry? You said Malfoy's been sneaking around. How do you know? Were you watching on your Map?"

"Yeah, I try to track him sometimes. That's how," he blushed, "I found and rescued you at the beginning of the term. I was tracking him and saw him and his goons with you in an out of the way corridor. I thought that was unusual enough to investigate."

Daphne leaned over and gave him a hug and then a kiss that curled his toes. "Thank you again, Harry. Give me some time to shake the Slytherin rumor tree."

The rest of the time that evening was spent finding out if Daphne could outdo her earlier kiss.

((A/N: We're half way through the story.))

Chapter 3

The third week in April came and Harry, through some potion enhanced luck, was able to get the memory from Professor Slughorn that Dumbledore wanted. Even though it was late, he immediately went to see the Headmaster. They viewed the memory and discussed it. They now thought they knew what they were up against -- a seven part split of Riddle's soul -- but there was still a little doubt. Most of the doubt came from where those seven parts, or Horcruxes, were hidden. Dumbledore had indicated that was a discussion for another day, as he had only vague ideas at the moment.

Harry felt very unlucky as he considered this development. As Dumbledore had indicated, he (or someone) would have to find and destroy all the Horcruxes before Voldemort could be truly killed. What would he do about that? As he pondered that for a few moments, the solution became obvious. He needed to share this information with the two smartest people in his life: Hermione and Daphne. The only problem came as he wondered if this information would get them hurt. He finally decided he would share with Hermione, and probably Ron, soon. He might wait a little bit long with Daphne, for her own safety.

As April ended, Harry and Daphne had one of their Wednesday night lessons/dates. While she hid it pretty well, Harry was getting to know her well enough that he could tell she was excited.

The moment the privacy spells went up, he asked, "You know something, don't you?"

"Yes," she told him smugly.

"What? Wait, you know what Malfoy is up to, don't you?" He tried not to get his hopes up, but it was hard not to. He was relieved when she nodded. "Well, don't keep me in suspense, tell me!"

"First, I can tell you without a doubt that Malfoy is a now a full-fledged Death Eater, marked and all."

"I knew it!" he shouted. "That evil git!"

"He was marked during the Easter holiday. Just so you know, Crabbe and Goyle are not. I suspect they might be used in Death Eater activities, but I doubt they will ever be marked. They're just too stupid." Daphne looked disgusted. Harry assumed it was because she did not think they lived up to the Slytherin standard.

"OK, good to know. Did you find out what Malfoy's been up to?"

"Yes. You won't believe this, but he has a two part plan. First, he's tasked with killing Dumbledore..."

"What?!" Harry could hardly believe what he was hearing.

"Wait, it gets better," she smirked. "He has to kill Dumbledore because his father failed with you in the Department of Mysteries last year, and if Draco doesn't succeed by the end of this school year, his father will probably be killed."

"Serves the bastard right," Harry said without any remorse. "What's part two of his plan?"

"He plans to kill Dumbledore by bringing some help into the castle." Harry looked at her questioningly, not fully understanding. "He's found a Vanishing Cabinet here in the Room of Requirement. Its mate is in Knockturn Alley. Unfortunately for him, the cabinet isn't working, so he's been trying to fix it. Once he does, he plans to bring in half a dozen or so other Death Eaters and they will storm the castle and help him kill Dumbledore, along with anyone else they feel like."

Harry just stared at her opened mouth for a moment. She reached over and with one well manicured finger pushed his chin up and chuckled. "Are you completely serious?" he finally got out. She nodded. "How did you find out?"

Daphne paused and obviously considered that before she answered. "Let's just say Slytherin cunning and leave it at that. I don't think you want to know." When he started to object, she added, "Although I will tell you that I was never in any danger and didn't have to do anything that I regret."

He considered that and decided that maybe it was best he did not know, because then he could honestly say he did not know and protect her. Nodding, he asked, "Very well, but does Malfoy know that you know? Are you in danger in the future and how fast do I have to act on this?"

A smile graced her face. "I do not believe he knows, but I still wouldn't take too long with it. He might fix the cabinet soon."

"Right." She had either used Legilimency passively while having a conversation with Malfoy, or perhaps she used active Legilimency and then Obliviated him. His inner-Slytherin pointed out that he really did not need to know and pushed that part of his conscience down. "I think I need to tell Dumbledore so Malfoy can be expelled. Do you also know how Malfoy got into the Room of Requirement? You know, what setting he used?"

"Sure, he was thinking of a good place to hide things," she told him.

It was so simple, he thought. "Brilliant! I can go visit there tomorrow and destroy it, or at least make it harder to repair."

"Probably a good idea. So, is this how all those adventures you told me about start? Some devious plot against the school, you and your friends investigate the mystery, then you do something heroic to save us all while we have no idea we're ever in any danger?" She had a hint of a smile, but she mostly seemed serious.

He gave her a hollow laugh. "There's more truth in your question than you know. About the only thing you have missing is that we try to tell some adult to help out, and they ignore us; or else we have adults working against us." He shook his head at the stupidity of it all.

"What about your friends, Ron and Hermione?"

"Ron believes Malfoy is up to something, but he doesn't care enough to find out."

"So he's just being a typical Gryffindor and blaming a Slytherin?" Harry was surprised at the heat in her question.

"Yeah, pretty much. We're not all like that, obviously," he told her with a smile to take the sting out of it. She calmed down and gave a small smile back. "Hermione thinks I'm being that 'typical Gryffindor' you mentioned, and that there's nothing really wrong or else Dumbledore has it all under control and I should just leave it alone. I can't wait to hear what she says about this."

"I'm sure it will be amusing," she said with a touch of sarcasm. "You'll have to tell me."

"Sure," he easily agreed. "So, what shall we practice this evening?"

"More Legilimency practice for you. I'll continue with a mild Occlumency barrier and increase that if you manage to break in. You seem to be getting the feel for this. Do you think so?" she asked.

"Yeah. I used it a little on Ron the other day. Not to read his memories," he hastily added, "but I wanted to know if he was telling me the truth. I happened to have my wand out at the time, so I casually pointed it at his leg and silently did the spell. It worked pretty well. I could tell he wasn't telling me the truth about one of his Quidditch plays, and after some questioning, I got him to admit he had been bragging a little. The second version of his story came across as truthful."

"Nice work, borderline ethical, but truth detecting has a more permissive guideline. Now try on me," she commanded.

Harry spent the next twenty minutes trying to break her barriers and only succeeded once, getting an image of her childhood. He also spent a little time practicing doing it non-verbally and wandlessly. The best he could do was a glimpse of her somewhere. Still, that was an improvement over his previous efforts in that area. He was getting better at this.

The part of the evening were spent snogging and cuddling. That definitely improved Harry's mood, and Daphne looked pretty happy too, so he decided to ask her about it as he pulled back from a kiss.

"Hey," he softly said. "You seem to be in a really good mood."

"I am," she purred before she gently kissed him again.

"Any special reason?"

"Uh-huh." She kissed him again.

Damn she was making this hard to talk, he thought. "Why?"

She cuddled against him as she spoke. "A couple of my plans are going very well, and that makes me very happy."

Harry found that interesting, as she looked the same in class and outside of her time with him. "What plans?"

Daphne chuckled. "Harry, all Slytherins-at-heart have some plan going all the time; it's just the way we are. You should know, you're that way too."

He considered that a moment. "I suppose I can see your point about me. So what plans have been going well for you?"

"You, for one," she told him as she kissed the back of his jaw. "Don't you think so?"

"Sure." It was not hard to agree with that. He thought they were doing quite well together. "If that's your first one, what else do you have going on?"

"My parents."

Harry shivered slightly at her breath in his ear as she spoke. "Why? What's happening with them?"

She pulled back slightly and chuckled. "I think I've managed to trick them a little and I've stalled their negotiations for me."

He raised his eyebrow at her.

"I've managed to convince them that I've found another way for them to be safe and that I just need a little time make things work. I really like you, Harry, and I'd like to see what becomes of us."

Harry had forgotten about the marriage negotiations her parents were handling, trying to arrange a marriage for her. "So you were just playing with me before?" He was not actually angry at her, but confused, he decided. Girls just made no sense sometimes.

Daphne sighed. "Harry, at the beginning, we were only casually dating. It was time to spend together and have fun, beyond my agreement to teach you Occlumency . Like most teenage romances, I didn't expect it to last for any length of time. Now that I know the real you, I think I want to find out if we could really work."

That floored him. "Daph! We've been dating for over two months and you're just now deciding this?"

"I thought you felt the same way, Harry, at least at first. I finally decided a few weeks ago that I really did like you and that you were serious about me. That caused me to become a lot more serious about you when I realized that."

He stopped himself from saying the first thing on his mind, which would not have been very kind. In thinking about it, he could see her point. Most couples dated for a month or two before they broke up. The ones talked about so much were the couples who dated for six months or more, but that was because they were so unusual.

"And you're serious now?" he finally asked her.

"Yes, Harry. I'm not, nor was I ever, trying to lead you on. I promise." She did look sincere too.

"I guess I understand," he told her with a small head shrug.

"You have to understand, Harry." She was staring into his eyes, as if willing him to understand. "I thought we were being normal, and well, I don't have a lot of dating experience either, being in Slytherin. For a

girl who makes the decision not be ridden like a broom, it can get very lonely there."

To say Harry was shocked was an understatement. "You're not serious are you?"

Daphne nodded solemnly. "There are only two kinds of girls in Slytherin: those who will do anything with anyone, and those who keep themselves apart. It can be a vicious place to live."

"So you and Tracey..."

"Yeah. We protect each other and are friends. You're my second real friend here and my first boyfriend," she admitted. "I just wanted to have a normal dating experience once, and well, I found out that I really like you, Harry." She stretched a little and kissed him deeply again.

Harry had been surprised several times tonight. He glanced at his watch and groaned when he saw the time. "I hate it when we have to leave here, but I think we need to go back. Plus, I have to go see the Headmaster."

She sighed and got up, pulling him up after her. "I really do like you, Harry -- very much."

"I like you too, Daphne."

After a last kiss, Harry left first. He headed for the Headmaster's office under his Invisibility Cloak, making his way to the Headmaster's stairs undetected. Using the password from his last meeting, which thankfully still worked, he went up and knocked on the door.

The old man's voice called out, "Enter."

Harry walked in and noticed that Fawkes was not there this evening. In some ways, that was too bad because he thought he might could uses the bird's calming song before this was all over. Hoping for the best, he pulled up his Occlumency barrier and pressed on.

"Harry, my boy, this is a surprise. What can I do for you?" The Headmaster's eyes were doing their usual twinkling routine.

"Headmaster, I've just found out some information that I thought you should know."

If the Headmaster was surprised at Harry's seriousness, he did not show it. "Of course, Harry. I'm always open to hearing new things. What have you found?"

Taking a deep breath, Harry told him, "I just found out that Draco Malfoy is trying to kill you, and he has to do that by the end of the school year."

"I know," Dumbledore told him very calmly.

"You know and you're not doing anything about it?" he asked incredulously.

"I did not say that I was doing nothing about it, Harry. I said that I know of his plan. If you wish to know, I have delegated this problem to Professor Snape."

"To Snape?!" Harry was beside himself.

"Professor Snape, Harry," the Headmaster gently corrected him. "And yes, I fully trust Professor Snape in handling this matter."

"Unbelievable," Harry muttered before he spoke up again. "Did you also know that Malfoy is now a full Death Eater with a Dark Mark too?"

"Yes I did. Professor Snape informed me of that when it happened a few weeks ago." The old wizard was still calm, as if discussing the weather.

"But that's illegal, or I understood that being a Death Eater is illegal," Harry pointed out.

"As the laws are currently written, it is. But I am working with Professor Snape to help Mr Malfoy see the error of his ways and return to normal society," Dumbledore told him as if it should have been obvious.

"But if it's illegal, you should expel him. It is your duty to keep the school safe," Harry argued.

"I am fulfilling that duty by having Professor Snape take care of the matter. I don't think there is anything more that can be said on the topic." Dumbledore seemed to be trying to bring the conversation to an end, but Harry would not let it.

"Does it also not matter that Malfoy is trying to bring Death Eaters into the castle?"

"What do you mean, Harry?" Now he seemed at least slightly concerned.

"I found out that Malfoy is trying to work on a magical artifact that will allow older Death Eaters into the castle in order to come kill you, and anyone else they happen to meet. Do you call that keeping us all safe?" Harry wanted to know.

The Headmaster frowned. "I haven't heard that, but I will check into it. Even if it is true, I don't think that really changes anything. Professor Snape will take care of that as well."

"Unbelievable!" Harry almost shouted. "You don't care about us do you?" Then it hit him, there was a pattern. "No, you don't care, because you've done this before. In fact, you've put the entire school at risk every year I've been here, and what for? Are we all just chess pieces to you? Who do you really care about?" Harry stood to pace, or maybe to leave, he was not sure which he was so agitated.

"Harry, please, sit down. You're jumping to conclusions and being unreasonable..."

"No sir," Harry cut him off. "I don't think I am. You're risking the lives of students who can't defend themselves against what? The hope the

Malfoy might see the error of his ways and become a normal person? Ha! I don't think so. And you're trusting Snape to watch over him and set him straight? Even more laughable."

"Professor Snape, Harry."

"No sir. I will not," he said forcefully. "He has belittled me, attacked me, mind-raped me, and who knows what else so many times over the years that he deserves no respect. And I find that I'm losing respect for you because you insist on that. I also find that I'm losing respect for you about Malfoy too. You're doing the easy thing instead of the right thing, sir. I guess this will end just like all the other major problems have over the last five years. I'll have to do something that might get me killed in order to save the day." Not able to take any more, Harry turned and angrily strode towards the door. He noted the Headmaster did not try to stop him, although there might have been a heavy sigh. It was hard to tell because of his heavy footsteps and breathing.

Looking at his watch, Harry saw he had about fifteen minutes before the library closed and curfew started. To give himself a little more time, he started running for Madam Pince's domain. Inside, he quickly walked over to the section that was about Hogwarts. It did not take him long to find the book that explained the policies of Hogwarts. Fortunately, it had a Table of Contents, so five minutes later, he had his answer. Leaving the library just as it closed, he strode only slightly less angrily than before towards his head of house's door.

Professor McGonagall opened her door after he knocked. "Mr Potter? Is something wrong?"

"Yes, Professor. I need to speak with you about something quite urgent."

She motioned him into her quarters. He had never been in before, but he was not surprised to find the decorations to be Scottish and minimal. After they both sat, she asked, "What can I help you with?"

"Professor, I have just come from talking to the Headmaster and I am quite concerned. So this is really in regards to your Deputy-Headmaster position."

She looked very surprised. "Very well, please proceed."

"Professor, I have just found out that Draco Malfoy is now a marked Death Eater, that he has plans to kill the Headmaster, and part of those plans include bringing at least a half dozen Death Eaters into the castle to help him and to cause trouble while they are here, probably killing any students they find."

Her hand flew to her chest in surprise. "My word! Are you serious?"

"Absolutely. Worse yet, the Headmaster refuses to expel Malfoy, instead claiming that he's trying to reform Malfoy and that the risk to the school and the students is not as important as helping Malfoy find a new path in life." He watched the Deputy Headmaster think all of this through.

After a very long moment, she finally asked, "And why did you bring this to me? The Headmaster really is the correct person to deal with this."

"Because, Professor," he said with exasperation, "he's ignoring his duty of keeping the school safe, and because the school by-laws say that you too can expel a student for the safety of the school."

She nodded. "While that is true, it is extremely rare for the Deputy to go against the Headmaster's wishes and go over his head. If Professor Dumbledore says that he is taking care of the matter, then I trust him to do so." When he started to object, she held up her hand to stop him. "I know that you and Mr Malfoy have never gotten along, but you shall just have to ignore him."

"Does that include when he is breaking the law?"

"No, Mr Potter. The moment he breaks the law, we shall call the Aurors to arrest him. We can do nothing before then."

"Professor, I'm not speaking of attempted murder. It is illegal to belong to an illegal group. By order of the Wizengamot, the Death Eaters are an illegal group, and his Dark Mark proves that," he said forcefully.

"While that would be true, I have seen no evidence of that Dark Mark. And before you ask," she hurried on, "I can not go search his person for that Mark. That would be illegal for me."

Harry rolled his eyes. "So just like in my first year, when I come to tell you of something dangerous, you're going to tell me to go on my way and ignore my warning?" To his glee, she looked slightly embarrassed.

"I'm afraid that the circumstances are different this time. I am bound by the law," she explained.

He could almost see her point of view, but the stakes were so high. What if Daphne was walking down the hall when the Death Eaters came in the school? No, he could not let this go. "So you will do nothing?"

"I can not do anything; I'm sorry, Mr Potter." She did look frustrated, although that did not solve the problem.

"I'm sorry too, Professor." He was exasperated as he stood to go.

"Mr Potter?"

He stopped at the door and looked at her.

"Please don't do anything illegal, foolish, or get yourself hurt. Trust the Headmaster; I'm sure he really does know what he's doing."

It was all Harry could do not to laugh. "If you call relying on another Death Eater to solve the problem the safest thing for the school, then I guess he has it under control." He did not wait for a reaction and left.

And they wonder why we never trusted them or brought all of our problems to them, he thought as he went up the stairs to the Gryffindor Tower.

Inside the common room, he saw all of his friends around various tables doing homework, except for Ron; he was playing a game of exploding snap with Dean and Seamus. He quickly went around and tapped each friend on the shoulder and motioned them to follow him. He went to an empty corner, conjured up a few extra chairs and waited. A minute later, he was surrounded by Ron, Hermione, Ginny, and Neville. He wished he could have gotten Luna too, but it was not possible given the time.

"What's up, Harry?" Ron asked.

"I have something really important. Wait, hold on." He pulled out his wand and put up a sound barrier around them. "There. Listen carefully. I finally found out what Malfoy has been up to."

"Harry..." Hermione started to complain.

He glared at her and she shut up. "After you hear what I have to say, I don't think you'll be as complacent. I've found that Malfoy has the Dark Mark, he's trying to kill Dumbledore, and he's going to do it by bringing Death Eaters into the school."

"What?" "You're joking?" "No way!" Hermione just gaped.

"I'm serious. And what's worse, is that Dumbledore knows this and doesn't care. He's told Snape and is letting the greasy git handle it all."

"Harry, that should be good enough. If Professor Dumbledore says it's under control..."

"Hermione! Would you listen to yourself? For once, consider the idea that Dumbledore doesn't have things under control, then what? What happens when half a dozen Death Eaters, and I'm talking about people like Bellatrix Lestrange, walk through the school?" Harry heard a sharp intake of air from Neville. "What if they pass you coming back

from the library while they're trying to help Malfoy kill the Headmaster? Do you honestly think they won't kill you on the spot so there are no witnesses?"

She had nothing to say to that.

"I even went to McGonagall since she can expel students too, and she deferred to the Headmaster also saying that he's got it under control and to trust him."

"You don't, do you?" Neville asked.

Harry saw a determined gleam in his friend's eyes. "No, I don't fully trust him because I finally realized that Dumbledore really doesn't care about the safety of the school. He's more concerned about turning bad people back to the good side," Harry stated.

"That's pretty severe, mate," Ron said, his loyalty for the Headmaster coming out before Hermione could say anything.

"I know, but I think it's true."

"Harry, it just can't be," Hermione protested.

"I think I agree with Harry," Ginny said quietly. "Look at what happened with me. How could he not have known it was a Basilisk that was hurting everyone? He was at the school fifty years ago. How could he not have known approximately where the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets was? He knew Myrtle was killed there and that was where all the messages on the wall were." She shivered once from the memory.

"She's right," Harry agreed. "My first year it was bringing the Philosopher's stone into the castle. The next year it was not immediately sealing the entrance to the Chamber or at least the second floor girl's bathroom. My third year it was letting the Dementors onto the grounds. The next year it was having that tournament here, and then making me compete and not showing the false Moody -- his old friend -- for who he really was. Last year it was letting Umbridge come here. This year it's Death Eater Malfoy. Each

year he has known about some spectacular danger, and yet he has put aside the safety of the school each time, while saying this school is the safest place in Britain."

Hermione hung her head in her hands. "It just can't be. He wouldn't do that. It just can't be..."

"Being an ostrich is unbecoming, Hermione," Ginny told her. The brunette looked up with a shocked expression. "I know that you look up to authority figures and books, and you've had some good ones in your life, but they all aren't perfect."

"But the level of incompetence that Harry is discussing is staggering! There must be something else going on we don't know about," Hermione objected.

"The more power one has, the more it can be abused, my Gran says," Neville commented. "What do we do, Harry? I'll do what you say; I'll go anywhere you lead."

"Thanks, Neville." Harry really did appreciate the vote of confidence.

Ron and Ginny also pledged their support. Harry looked at Hermione.

"I guess so, but please promise me you won't do anything rash," she asked. She seemed to be going along with the group, but it appeared her heart was not really in it.

Harry laughed, which drew a glare from his bushy-headed friend. "I don't know what I'm going to do yet, but it must be soon. If anyone has any ideas, let me know." Everyone promised to think about it. Harry wanted to talk to one more person, but she was unavailable until tomorrow.

The next day, Harry had Potions class, which for once he was thankful. When Slughorn was not looking, he managed to drop a small folded note on Daphne's desk when he was getting supplies. It simply said "lunch in our dinner spot -- urgent!"

At noon, he had a large plate of sandwiches and juice in the Room of Requirement.

Daphne entered Disillusioned. She did not seem to be happy to be there. "What's so urgent?" In fact, she looked slightly upset with him.

"I talked to Dumbledore and he doesn't care what Malfoy's doing, he won't expel him or do anything else other than leave it all to Snape."

Daphne snorted. "That won't do any good."

"I know. I talked to McGonagall and she won't do anything either saying it was all up to Dumbledore." He then spent the next five minutes explaining his theory and the past examples of how the Headmaster did not really care about the safety of the school. As she seriously looked at him, he ended with, "And I have to do something, because I could never forgive myself if you got killed in all of this."

She slowly smiled and finally walked over to him and kissed him lightly on the lips. "That's sweet, Harry. I take it you're looking for ideas on what to do?"

"Yeah. I don't have any good ones, and Hermione doesn't totally believe Dumbledore would purposefully do this, so she's not helping. She's the one who normally comes up with the plan. I need something ... cunning," he told her with a devious smile to try and win her over.

Daphne laughed. "So you're stuck and need a Slytherin's perspective?" she asked with her own smile.

"I see it as my inner-Slytherin recognizing that I need a real Slytherin's help," he said without a trace of jest.

"But of course. Well, the usual solution is to make sure you have all of your facts correct, which I believe you do, and then force the result you want, usually with blackmail. In this case, document everything, send copies to as many people as you can really trust so all the information can't be removed or Obliviated, then tell Dumbledore he has twenty-four hours to turn Malfoy over to the Aurors or you will

release all the information you know to people or groups that will investigate the problem thoroughly. It will be important not to make it sound threatening, or at least as little as possible."

"How do I do that?" he asked.

"Make it sound more like Malfoy needs to be expelled because of legal issues and you're going to make sure the law is followed in twenty-four hours if it's not done first by someone else. You probably should not mention the other letters except verbally; having that written down will make it look like blackmail. Don't worry, they will read between the lines properly," she assured him.

"So I need to send this to both Dumbledore and McGonagall?" he clarified.

"Yes, since they both have responsibility."

"I like that. Yes, very ... cunning." He grinned at her.

"All right, now that the emergency is over, let's eat. I'll need to come up with an excuse as to where I've been." A slight look of annoyance returned. "Tracey is getting very suspicious of me. Being missing on Saturday nights has been especially problematic," she groused slightly.

"Maybe we can come out of hiding at the end of the year?" he suggested with a hopeful look on his face.

"Maybe. I'll start thinking about it. It may also depend on what our plans are for the summer. We'll talk about it later," she told him.

Harry was fine with that. He was also fine with several kisses before she left. Since Harry had no class until three, he spent his free time writing his letter. He wished he could have Daphne look it over before he sent it, but he would just have to do it himself. At this point, he did not entirely trust Hermione to help, since she did not seem to be fully on board. After some thought, he decided that Neville might be a good person since he grew up in the Wizarding World. He showed his friend the letter that evening and Neville liked it.

He wrote one more short letter. In it, he asked the person to hide the sealed letter for three days, unless Dobby returned to collect it. If that did not happen, he asked the person to open and read the letter, make copies, and send the copies to the Minister for Magic, the Director of the DMLE, the Daily Prophet, the Quibbler, the Hogwart's Board of Governors, and anyone else they thought should know and could help correct a potentially troubling situation at school.

He then made three copies of the two letters, sealed the main one in an envelope, and put that envelope and the instruction letter in a bigger envelope. Those three copies went to Moony, Arthur Weasley, and Griphook. He added the goblin at the last minute because he thought Dumbledore would not think of him. To be sure the letter was not ignored, he added five Galleons to Griphook's letter and mentioned it was for taking the goblin's time with this business. He gave those to Dobby for delivery.

Harry then made six more copies of the main letter and gave them to Ron, Hermione, Neville, Ginny, Luna, and Daphne. Two more were made for his 'victims'. He was saddened to have to do this, but felt he must.

Early the next morning, he gave the two Professor's letters to Hedwig with instructions to wait until the morning mail flock came in. She hooted an acknowledgement. He then gave Daphne's to a school owl and told it to deliver the letter as soon as possible. He had given his Gryffindor friends their letters last night. Luna's he would hand deliver at breakfast, quietly telling her to put it in her trunk and not tell anyone about it.

Fortunately, Luna was already in the Great Hall when he arrived. She accepted the letter and his instructions without comment, slipping it into her robes. Harry took a seat in his usual spot and ate while he waited. His friends joined him, but he could not really keep up any conversation he was so nervous. It was just like before a Quidditch game.

Daphne walked in and gave him a slight nod. He smiled knowing that she had her letter. He wished he could talk to her as she always

made him feel better, but that was not to be. He also hoped they could stop hiding their relationship soon. Unless she said otherwise, he planned to spend as much time with her as possible over the summer. He also planned to live somewhere else other than at the Dursleys. He did not know where at the moment, but it probably would not be at Grimmauld Place either; or if so, only for a couple of weeks.

"Why are you looking at the Slytherins, mate?" asked a slightly disgusted voice.

Harry was surprised at the question and at being caught, as he had been lost in thought. Turning to his best friend, he said, "I was just thinking cunning thoughts and seeing what they were doing. Why? There's nothing wrong with most Slytherins."

"Are you barmy?" Ron almost exploded. "They're Slytherins, Harry. You can't trust any of them."

"I agree with that about Malfoy and his groupies, but you can't know that about the rest of them until you get to know them, Ron." Harry knew Ron did not like the Slytherins as a whole, but he had never realized how deeply biased his friend was. Thinking about it, he realized this was only one example after many others over the years.

"They're Slytherin, that's all you need to know." Ron was adamant in his view.

"Ron, that's very narrow-minded," Hermione chastised him.

Harry was saved from having to listen to the argument and his biased friend because the morning rush of owls came in with the mail. Harry kept an eye on the head table. One of the last owls to come in was Hedwig. She flew to Professor McGonagall and then Dumbledore, letting each pull a letter off of her leg before she left. Only Dumbledore seemed to immediately know who Hedwig was and looked at Harry before opening the letter. His customary twinkle was not present, as if he sensed a problem. Harry did not feel any presence against his Occlumency barrier, but he carefully maintained it anyway.

Harry had been over the letter so many times trying to get it right; he could easily quote it as the professors read it.

Dear Professor (name),

It has come to my attention that there is criminal activity within Hogwarts. Specifically, that Draco Malfoy has recently taken the Dark Mark of Voldemort's illegal organization, known as the Death Eaters. In addition, he has plans to kill the Headmaster by means of smuggling a group of Death Eaters into the school to help him. Given the normal actions of Death Eaters, I fear for the life of any student they might meet, or really for the lives of all students and teachers while they are in the building.

Now that you know of this illegal activity, I ask that you expel Draco Malfoy and call the Ministry Aurors to arrest him. If you have not had time to do so in the next 24 hours, I shall be happy to assist you by calling the proper authorities.

I hope you do the right thing quickly for the safety of all in the school.

Sincerely,
Harry J. Potter

As he continued to watch them, he saw McGonagall bristle and then turn to Dumbledore for a quick conversation. When that finished, she stood and walked to him.

"Mr Potter. The Headmaster and I would like to talk to you immediately after breakfast."

"Certainly, Professor. I'll be up as soon as I'm done. May I assume that his password has not changed?"

"You may," she said curtly and left.

Hermione looked at him. "You gave them the letter, didn't you?"

"I had to. It's official notification. My verbal warning can be swept under the rug. This can not," he said seriously.

"You're going to be in so much trouble," she predicted.

Harry shrugged, not making more of response because she was still one of his best friends. However, he could not stop himself from saying, "It can't be any worse than last year. They won't have a Blood Quill." All of his friends shuddered.

Dean was sitting next to Ginny, even though they had broken up last week. "What letter did you write, Harry?"

Harry paused as he considered what to say. "There's a danger in the castle and I officially notified the Headmaster and Deputy-Headmaster of the problem so they can take care of it."

Dean frowned. "Officially? It sounds like you're saying you told them and they didn't believe you?"

"I can't go into details," Harry explained, "but I won't say you're wrong."

"I know of some of your adventures, Harry, and that does not make me feel good," Dean told him with concern.

"Be patient. It will all be resolved soon one way or another, and I think you'll like the results." Harry rose. "If you'll excuse me, I need to attend a meeting." The two professors had already left, so he did need to go.

Harry had predicted this meeting would happen when he wrote the letters. He was not happy about it, but viewed it as one of those hurdles he had to pass over to get to the final destination. So as he arrived at the stairs to the Headmaster's office door, he took a deep breath and squared his shoulders, determined to see this through. He raised his Occlumency barrier as he went in.

With as much control and calmness as he could muster, he addressed them. "Professors? You asked to see me?"

"Yes, Harry, please have a seat." Dumbledore was as calm and polite as ever as he sat behind his desk, but there was no twinkle in his eye and no candy offered. Professor McGonagall sat in the chair next to him, still bristling slightly.

"Now Harry, what exactly are you trying to accomplish with this letter of yours?"

"Exactly what it says, Headmaster. I want the school to be safe for all of us. Therefore, I have given you an official notification of a safety issue along with the correct course of action: the expulsion and arrest of Draco Malfoy. I've also offered to start the second part of the suggestion in motion, should you not have time while you are dealing with the expulsion part." Harry did his best not to sound sarcastic and condescending, and it was hard.

"Mr Potter, this is blackmail!" McGonagall vigorously objected.

"No, Professor, it is not. I'm not asking for any gain for myself or for any illegal action. I am only asking you to carry out the duties of your position, nothing more. I will agree that I am forcing the time in which you act, but the risks are quite high if you do not act quickly."

"Harry, there really is no need for the dramatic here. I have the situation well in hand," Dumbledore told him.

"Really? What have you changed since we last discussed this problem, Headmaster?"

"Nothing has had to change because I've had the problem well in hand all along. Professor Snape is handling it for me," Dumbledore explained.

"This would be the same Snape who attacks students, except for Draco Malfoy? The same Snape who doesn't care if students get hurt as long as they aren't Slytherins? The same Snape who hates me just because I look like my father? The same Snape who has a Dark Mark on his arm? That is the man you're entrusting the safety of the school to?"

"Mr Potter! You must show respect for the teachers," McGonagall admonished him.

Harry turned to his head of house. "Professor. As I explained to the Headmaster yesterday, I can no longer respect the man who belittles me, attacks my parents and name, attacks me, mind-rapes me, and has no respect whatsoever for me, and who has done so from my first day at Hogwarts before I even knew who he was. That person deserves no respect."

McGonagall sat there gawking at his diatribe.

"In fact, Professor, I wish to formally withdraw from my Defense Against the Dark Arts class. I will no longer sit under that man's instruction. I will study on my own time. I would ask that someone administer the end of year exam such that I might finish my sixth year. Going to his class from this point on would be detrimental to me and to my house, which will lose points because I breathe."

"Please, Harry, you're being overly dramatic..."

"And you're ignoring reality, Headmaster. I've lost well over fifty points over the years for literally breathing. I'm sure I've lost hundreds of points in his class for doing the same thing that Draco Malfoy does, who has only ever gained points in our Potions class. I've also earned numerous detentions from him for doing normal class work."

Dumbledore shook his head, while McGonagall had a very severe look on her face, one that seemed to say an investigation would be forthcoming.

"Mr Potter, we have gotten very far off track," McGonagall announced. "Do you have any other reasons for Mr Malfoy to be expelled?"

Harry worked hard to resist rolling his eyes. "No, Professor, but after you consider that he is breaking the law and if Malfoy gets his way, you'll have people like Bellatrix Lestrange and her husband and brother walking through the halls throwing the Killing Curse at students. How will you feel when a group of Gryffindor first years are

killed and you knew you had the chance to prevent it? That is why I'm doing this. I don't want anyone else I know killed." He took a deep breath before he quietly added, "It's happened far too many times already."

"Albus, what is your plan?" McGonagall finally asked in the silence.

"I'm considering closing the Owlery. I'm afraid that I can not let you send out any communication about this, Harry," Dumbledore sadly told him.

Harry could not help it; he let out a short laugh. "Sure, feel free, but it won't matter at all."

"And why not?"

"Because Headmaster, the information is already outside of Hogwarts, in multiple hiding places with timers already running. If I do nothing, many letters will go out detailing this problem. The only action left for me is to stop the letters going out, which I will not do unless Malfoy is arrested by this time tomorrow." Harry turned to his head of house. "Professor McGonagall, will you change your mind?"

She had a moment of indecision while she looked between him and the Headmaster.

"You must trust me, Minerva. I know what I'm doing and it's for the greater good," the Headmaster told her.

Harry really wanted to ask what "the greater good" really meant, but he resisted as he did not want to upset McGonagall any more with his cheek.

McGonagall looked at her superior thoughtfully. Finally, she looked back at Harry and answered, "Yes, Mr Potter. I will start the paperwork to expel Mr Malfoy. You can expect him to be gone by lunch time."

"Thank you, Professor. I'm glad you've decided to do the right thing for the school," he told her with a slight bow of the head. "You're restored the respect I had for you."

"I must offer my apologies, Mr Potter," she said softly. "I assumed the Headmaster had the situation more under control than what you had told me, that he had not communicated everything to you. However, I was wrong and I must correct that. You are dismissed for classes. If you will be in the Entrance Hall before lunch, you will see justice carried out."

Harry noticed that Dumbledore seemed very unhappy, but he was saying nothing. He hoped the old man was not going to try to pull a fast one at the last minute. "Thank you, Professor McGonagall. I look forward to lunch time." With nothing more to say, he left, breathing a deep sigh of relief once he had left the office.

Many thoughts were running through Harry's head. He knew something had to be done about Malfoy, but was he handling this the right way? How was this going to affect his relationship with Dumbledore? While part of him did not care, a part of him also knew he needed the old man for the Horcrux hunt. At least he had convinced McGonagall to do the right thing, but what would his friends think of him for doing this? Most importantly, what would Daphne think of him? He figured she would not be too bothered since it was mostly her idea, but he was still worried about his girlfriend's thoughts.

Suddenly, his arm and his body were jerked to the side. Before he knew what was happening, he was in a secret passageway with a soft body and familiar lips pressed against him. He wrapped his arms around the mostly invisible body and enjoyed the greeting from the girl whose scent he now knew so well.

"Well, hello to you too," he smirked as Daphne's lips released him and she canceled the Disillusionment spell on herself.

"Turnabout is fair play, especially when it's a cunningly good idea," she playfully said.

Harry had done the same thing to her last week. Of course, he had the Marauder's Map to help him find her when she was alone, but today, she had seen Harry go off after the professors and they have both known that would happen.

"How did it go?" she asked, now a little more seriously.

"Not as good as I'd hope, but about as expected. Dumbledore refused to change his mind, quoting the 'greater good' line he's used in the past. McGonagall changed her mind and said she would expel Malfoy and call the Aurors. Once she said that, Dumbledore did not countermand her, and hopefully he didn't after I left. My only real fear is that he won't let her follow through."

"I see..." She was deep in thought.

"McGonagall said that I should be in the Entrance Hall before lunch and I'd see the Aurors doing their job. I think that was her way of apologizing and proving she would do what she promised." He shrugged. "I guess we'll find out in a couple of hours."

"With Malfoy out of the way, that will make life a lot easier for you, well, for everyone really." She laughed a little. "That will also create a power vacuum and a power struggle in Slytherin. I wonder who will take over?"

"Why not you?" Harry asked, genuinely curious.

She smiled. "You have no idea how Slytherin house really works, Harry. I'm not popular enough or ruthless enough to take over leadership. Even Tracey and I together probably couldn't do it, although we might be able to cause a stalemate in most cases."

"But couldn't you do it with the backing of all the younger students? You know, as a more moderate or neutral faction?" Harry wondered out loud. "I thought those things happened because people followed, even if by threat like Malfoy did. Who cares if there are a few very vocal people if no one will follow them?"

Daphne considered that. "The main problem is the threat of force, that's usually why it's the older students who make up the leadership. Malfoy sort of took over in fourth year because he could draw on the perceived power of his father, who was on the board of governors. By the time his father was arrested, Malfoy had enough of a following and physical power to carry on." She paused. "You have a point, though. Pansy will be the most vocal, but she can be marginalized. Nott will be the most dangerous, but if he's by himself, we can probably control him. I think Zabini will be the key. If Tracey and I can get him to go along with it, Bulstrode probably won't fight and we might be able to do it as a coalition."

"What about the seventh years?"

"To be honest, most of them just want to be left alone, sort of like Tracey and me. Even Crabbe and Goyle won't be a problem after Malfoy is gone." She giggled. "I swear there are only two brain cells between them. I really think they should have failed a grade somewhere, except that Snape passed them on anyway."

"So you'll do it?" Harry asked hopefully.

"I'll talk to Tracey. We've got Ancient Runes together next." She looked at him with a big grin. "What are you going to do with the rest of your morning, besides gloat?"

He laughed. "I don't plan to gloat that much. I still have another rather large problem to solve." He looked at her hesitantly. "We need to talk soon. I, uh," he took a deep breath and slowly let it out. "I think I'm ready to tell you a few more secrets. You deserve to know now, and well, I could honestly do with another opinion."

"A more cunning opinion?" she teased.

"Now that you mention it, yes." He pulled her tightly against him and kissed her deeply.

"Umm, I like that," she purred.

"I'm afraid I have some news you won't like though." She raised an expertly manicured eyebrow. "I told McGonagall to drop me from my Defense class. There's no way Snape will let me out the door without massive loss of points and detentions for nothing. I'll study on my own. Maybe we can practice that for a little bit when we get together, since I don't seem to be progressing any more on Occlumency or Legilimency."

Daphne gave him a cute pout. "Spoilsport, now I don't get to see you as much." She sighed before she went on. "But I do understand. Yeah, that'll probably work. He never shows us anything in class that's not in the book anyway."

"I know, that's was just another reason to do it," he said matter-of-factly.

"As much fun as this is, I have to go to my next class. I'll see you at lunch, even if we can't talk." Her lips brushed his, as if making a promise.

"You can rejoice too. We'll just have to wait until Saturday night to do it together," he teased.

"OK. Take care of yourself, Harry."

"You too, Daph. See you soon." He gave her one last long kiss before she went. When he was alone, he walked towards the Entrance Hall and grabbed a bench there. Pulling out his Defense book to get some reading in, he waited.

Almost an hour later, four Aurors walked in the front door and headed for the Headmaster's office. The lead Auror was Kingsley Shacklebolt. Harry gave him the slightest of nods and received the same. With a smile on his face, Harry continued his reading.

Forty-five minutes later, Ron and Hermione came by on their way to lunch.

"Harry? What are you doing reading here?" Hermione asked with a look like he had lost his marbles.

"Yeah, mate, what's up?" Ron seemed equally perplexed.

"I'm doing a little reading while I wait," he casually told them while he searched for a bookmark.

"Waiting on what?" Ron barely beat Hermione with the question.

"Have a seat and find out. It shouldn't be too long." Harry put his book up now that he had someone to talk to. "By the way, I had to drop Defense class for the rest of the year."

"WHAT?!" Hermione was beside herself. "Harry James Potter, you can't drop the class you need most!"

"Actually I can. Snape never teaches anything but what's in the book, so as long as I keep up my reading and some practicing, I'll be fine. Also, after today, he would take so many points off because of me that it wouldn't be fair to the rest of the house. Even with me not in his class, I bet he looks for ways to do it or to give me detention anyway."

"What are you on about, Harry?"

Harry was saved from having to answer by a large set of footsteps coming down the hall. They turned and saw the Headmaster, Professor McGonagall, Professor Snape, four Aurors, and Draco Malfoy, who was in manacles. Dumbledore looked resigned, McGonagall looked determined, Snape and Malfoy both looked livid.

"Christmas has come early," Ron muttered, although his friends easily heard him.

Harry did his best to keep his face neutral and his Occlumency barrier up. When Snape saw him, he seemed to go off the deep end.

"Potter did this, didn't he? He's the one who's leveled these baseless charges. Headmaster, I demand you expel him for falsely accusing another student of crimes," the Potions teacher sneered.

Harry ignored him and looked at the Aurors. Their faces were neutral masks, except for Shacklebolt's, who seemed to be smiling slightly.

"Mr Potter." Harry looked at his head of house. "While the plot to assault a professor is enough to expel Mr Malfoy and to start an investigation, if you have any evidence of the other concerns you have, that would help the investigation."

"I assume you've looked at his left arm?"

"No, Mr Potter. As I explained earlier, I am not allowed to do that on accusation alone." While McGonagall's tone was level, her face showed that she really wished she could do as he suggested.

"I see. Well, I can show you evidence of the other crime." He rose and started walking. As he drew even with Malfoy, he quickly drew his wand, twirled, and cast "Diffindo." Before anyone else could react, the left sleeve of Malfoy's robes fell down to the manacles leaving the boy's arm bare. There for all to see was the Dark Mark. "Well, I guess that proves another crime."

"I'll get you for that, Potter!" Malfoy screamed. "That's assault!"

"Reparo." Harry cast, and the arm of the robes was restored. "You were never hurt, nor were you deprived of any property. I merely exposed you for what you are -- Death Eater." He sneered to emphasize the label as he glared at Malfoy, who returned the look. "If everyone will follow me, I'll show you how he was going to bring Death Eaters into the castle. He started walking and found everyone following him, even Ron and Hermione.

On the seventh floor, he used the thought Daphne had told him and the door to the Room of Requirement appeared.

"What is this place?" McGonagall asked.

"A magical room that can change its form. In this case, it is a place to hide things. Harry led them in. It wasn't too hard to find what he was looking for. "Here it is," he said pointing to the item. "Malfoy was going to use this Vanishing Cabinet to sneak Death Eaters into the

castle. It's supposedly not working at the moment, so he's been trying to fix it."

Malfoy was gaping at him.

"By Malfoy's expression, I must be right." Malfoy started to deny it, but Harry talked over him. "You'll find the matching cabinet at Borgin and Burkes in Knockturn Alley. If you check this cabinet closely enough, I'm sure you'll find Malfoy's fingerprints all over it."

Shacklebolt reached down and grabbed Malfoy's right hand. He did a spell, tapping his wand on Malfoy's hand and then the cabinet. A number of little yellow spots suddenly appeared on the cabinet. "He has been touching it, so that's enough to take him in for it. Williamson?" He looked at another Auror. "Shrink that and put it in an evidence box. Jones, you and Purnell go to Borgin and Burkes and see if you can find a cabinet like this. If you do, take it as evidence after leaving a receipt." The two men left. "Mr Malfoy, you'll be coming with me. Mr Potter, thank you for your help." The Auror pulled the struggling boy along; Malfoy was no match for the big Auror and his helper.

As the residents of the school were about to leave the Room of Requirement, Dumbledore looked at Harry. "Mr Potter, I believe you should be heading to the Owlery to send some notes to collect some letters."

Harry nodded formally. "I will take care of it immediately after lunch, sir." He quickly left for the Great Hall with his friends in tow.

When they were alone, Ron crowed, "You did it, Harry! You got rid of Malfoy! You'll be the hero of the school!"

"Ron! This is bad. Another student got arrested."

"Hermione, it was Malfoy. Considering how rude he's been to you, not to mention the spells he's shot at you over the years, I'd think you'd be happy."

"But his life could be ruined now. He'll probably spend years in Azkaban," she pointed out.

Harry tuned them out. He could see Hermione's point, that it was bad for anyone this young to be in that situation, but he agreed with Ron more. Malfoy made his choice, now he had to live with it.

In the Great Hall, the conversations were rather loud. Others had seen Malfoy in manacles and being escorted out by Aurors. It was the topic of the day. When Harry caught Daphne's eye, she gave him a slight smile and nod. He assumed that meant success on her part. He'd find out in two nights.

After lunch, he stopped by the kitchens and found Dobby. Dobby was happy to help Harry and twenty minutes later, Dobby returned with three letters. To Harry's surprise, Griphook had only kept one of the five Galleons.

On Saturday, Harry was walking down the hall, heading back to the Tower after Quidditch practice. He was walking quickly, trying to catch up to Ron, who had left shortly before Harry and was just ahead. Suddenly, a door between the two opened and Snape stepped out of the room. He turned and saw Harry coming towards him; he had not seen Ron.

"Potter!" the teacher spat.

Harry looked at him and instantly brought his Occlumency barrier up. He also did his best to keep his distaste for the man off of his face. Keeping quiet seemed like the best thing to do. Harry also noticed that Ron had stopped at the end of the corridor and was watching the scene intently.

"Well, what do you have to say for yourself?" the man sneered.

"Nothing ... sir."

Snape looked him over before he sneered, "Fifty points from Gryffindor for your slovenly appearance."

Harry knew Snape would treat him badly, but this was insane. He somehow managed to keep his tongue still. Thankfully, Ron had not said anything either, although he was so mad his complexion almost matched the color of his hair.

After a long moment, the professor added, "And detention for your cheek, Potter. Be in my classroom tonight at eight." With that, he stormed off, his cloak bellowing behind him. Harry just shook his head and slowly walked forward to his friend.

"That git! I can't believe ... Did you see ... I mean ... GAH!" Ron was beyond angry.

Harry was not happy, but he thought he knew how to deal with this. "Come on, Ron. We have to go see McGonagall -- now." He grabbed his friend's Quidditch jersey and pulled him along. He knocked on his head of house's door when they arrived.

"Mr Potter, Mr Weasley. What seems to be the problem?"

"Professor. I've just had a run in with Snape as I was walking down the hall. I didn't do anything, Professor, and he took 50 points away for 'slovenly dress'. It's Saturday and I've just finished Quidditch practice. How am I supposed to look?" It was impossible not to sound upset, but Harry was glad he had not started shouting, which he wanted to do.

McGonagall just sighed.

"Then when I didn't say anything to him about the points, he gave me detention for 'my cheek'. I guess he was expecting me to say something about the points," Harry explained.

She looked to Ron. "Were you there, Mr Weasley?"

"Yes Professor," he answered, still barely controlling his anger. "I was at the end of the hall and I don't think Snape saw me, but it was exactly as Harry said and extremely unfair, just like in class."

McGonagall thought about it for a moment. "Fifty points to Gryffindor," she announced, "and ten points to each of you for holding your tongue. You're detention tonight is canceled, Mr Potter. I shall speak to Professor Snape about it. While I doubted you at the time, I now see the wisdom in you dropping his class. So you will not be penalized further, I shall personally administer your final Defense exam, Mr Potter."

"Thank you, Professor," he said with great relief.

"Go get cleaned up for dinner, both of you. If you have any other trouble with Professor Snape, please bring that to my attention." She dismissed them.

"Wow, that's great, Harry," Ron congratulated his friend. "We should have complained about him before now."

As they started up the long stairs to the Tower, Harry considered that. "I'm not sure it would have helped, Ron. McGonagall knows that Snape isn't a good teacher, but I don't think she's ever realized what he was truly like before. I suspect Snape did his best to get Malfoy off yesterday, and that really opened her eyes."

"Too bad you can't get Snape arrested too," Ron commented.

"Yeah, too bad," Harry agreed verbally, while he mentally wondered if there was something he could do. Perhaps his girlfriend could give him some ideas when he saw her this evening.

While Harry met Daphne in various rooms on Wednesday nights, they continued to meet in the Room of Requirement on Saturday nights. They changed the setting slightly from week to week, but they always went for some form of cozy place to eat and talk. Tonight was no exception.

Dobby had just served them dinner when Daphne skipped all the small talk and launched into the biggest problem in her life at the moment.

"Harry? I'm really concerned about Tracey. She's beyond suspicious now and is starting to nose about and even follow me occasionally." She stabbed at her salad in frustration.

"I thought you said she was your best friend?"

"She is, but we've never held something this big back from each other. Plus, it's just the Slytherin way to collect information about people; you just never know when it will be useful." She drank some of her water as she let him think about it;

Harry ate some of his lasagna as he thought. "You're saying we need to tell her, aren't you?" Harry was guessing more than anything.

"I think so. Have you told your best friends?" she asked curiously, even though she was almost sure he had not.

Harry shook his head. "They've been curious and almost found me out at times, but I've kept it from them. I have enough things going on that only Hermione could keep track of it all, and I put her off with comments about doing things for Dumbledore that he has requested I keep secret. Plus she's up to her eyebrows in revising for exams. It's also why I always keep the Map and my Cloak on me, so she can't use those to check on me or follow me."

She chuckled. "So, you're lying to them."

"Like a Slytherin," he said a huge grin.

"Oh shut it, you," although she still chuckled about it.

"Do you think you can tell her that you do have a boyfriend, but it would be best for everyone if she could wait until summer for the details?"

Daphne considered that. "Maybe. I might have to extract an oath of secrecy if I tell her sooner. Do you really think it will be safe to tell her this summer?"

"I hope so, because I'm tired of having to hide you, Daph." He put down his fork and looked her right in the eyes. "I like being around you, and I want to do that more. I want to talk to you and hold your hand in public, or even better, hold you whenever I want. I know we said keeping our relationship a secret would make it safer for you, but I'm starting to want you near me more. Maybe I'm willing to take a chance. If Tracey is the only one who knows over the summer, then we wait to announce ourselves next school year, I think I can keep you pretty safe here. After we get out of school, we can stay together and I can keep you safe that way. My only real concern is protecting you from Voldemort."

"Do you really mean that, Harry?" she asked seriously. "Are you really planning a long term relationship with me?"

He picked up his fork and pushed his green beans around on his plate for a moment, obviously deep in thought. He looked back up and stared straight into her beautiful blue eyes again. "Yeah, I'm starting to think that I am. I've never thought about long term anything before, much less with someone, but I really enjoy being around you. There's something special about you that just seems right. I uh, I hope you like being around me."

Daphne gave him her biggest smile. "Absolutely, Harry. I would be very interested in discussing long term plans with you sometime -- maybe this summer?" He nodded. "So what do you feel for me, Harry?"

A frustrated sigh escaped him. He put his fork back down and pushed his almost empty plate to the side. "I don't know and that's part of my problem. I'm starting to wonder if this is what love is, but I've never experienced love, so I don't know," he said with some frustration.

She left her mostly eaten dinner and rushed around the table to pull him up and into a hug. "Oh Harry," she softly said while she held him tightly. "It's not right that you were deprived of basic things while you were little, things everyone should have, like love." She gently kissed him. "I don't know if this is the best definition of love, but I consider love to be what you have for a person when not having them would create an unfillable hole in your heart. It can be love of a friend, a

family member, or even romantic love. But when it would hurt terribly not to have them in your life, you know it's love."

Harry considered that while he held her close. With a slightly goofy grin, he told her, "Then I love you, Daph. I love you so much, I'd do stupid things like hide us to keep you safe, even though it hurts me to not be with you."

She rewarded him with another gentle kiss. "I love you too, Harry. And it's not stupid to want to keep me safe, that's a very loving and caring attitude. Still, I think we're going to have to tell people soon."

"Maybe just Tracey for now, with a secrecy promise. I don't think I'll tell my friends until the summer though."

"OK," she agreed.

"Maybe you could bring her next Wednesday. I could stand under my Cloak and watch. I think that would be fun."

She laughed. "Yeah, and she'd probably like to talk to you too."

"I'd tell everyone about us tomorrow if only Voldemort wasn't around. As soon as I beat him, I can't think of any reason to hide us."

She kissed him again. "I can hardly wait. Let's go sit down. You said you had some things to tell me."

His expression saddened. "Yeah, I do." He pulled her over to the couch. She snuggled against him.

"Do you remember back when you guessed that I was the Chosen One?" he asked her as he softly caressed her arm.

"Yeah. Oh wait. Are you telling me that's really true?" She looked up at him with wide eyes.

"Shortly before my parents were killed, a prophecy was made that started like:

The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches... born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies."

"But that's so generic it could apply to any one of a lot of people," she argued.

"For your safety, I won't tell you the rest of the prophecy, but it gets specific enough that I am the one. I have to kill him or be killed. That's why it's so dangerous to be around me. That's why he keeps coming after me." He stopped there. What more was there to say?

"I assume Dumbledore's been training you to handle this? No wonder you're so good since you've had almost six years with him..."

Harry could not hold the laughter in and it burst out of him. Daphne looked a little hurt. "No, not your fault," he wheezed after a few moments.

"Really, that would be logical," he finally told her when he got his breath back. "He only told me about the prophecy at the end of last year. This year, all he's done is go over the history of Voldemort. I've learned useful things about him, but Dumbledore hasn't taught me any advanced magic or anything to win the fight."

"That stupid bastard!" she hissed angrily. "How does he expect you to win?"

He shrugged. "He says the power of love will be my secret weapon because Voldemort doesn't have any."

A skeptical look graced her face. "Riiight. You're supposed to hug and kiss him to death?" she asked sarcastically.

Harry chuckled. "I haven't a clue. I guess I'll figure it out when it happens."

"Not a good idea, Harry. You should have a plan first." Daphne looked intently at him and it was obvious she was thinking the situation through. "Are there any restrictions on how you have to win or what you can't do?"

"None that I'm aware of," he answered.

"OK, let me give that some thought." She looked at him, staring deeply into his eyes. "I'll help you get through this Harry. I like having you around."

"And hugging and kissing too?" he asked with a slight tease.

Daphne kissed him deeply. "That too," she purred, before she started kissing him again.

As he snogged her, all Harry could think of was how wonderful it was to have a girlfriend like Daphne.

Life in the school continued on. Hermione harped on their end of year exams, which would be starting in about a month. Ron did his best to ignore her, choosing to concentrate on Quidditch and grousing about the stupidity of all Slytherins. Harry did his best to correct Ron without bringing undue attention to himself, and catch glimpses of his girlfriend until their next time together.

Harry was hiding in a fifth floor classroom under his Invisibility Cloak. A few minutes after eight on a Wednesday evening when the door opened and two girls in Slytherin robes walked in. The blonde cast privacy charms on the door while the brunette waited patiently.

"Are you finally going to come clean on all of your sneaking around, Daphne?"

"Yes, Tracey. I'm sorry I kept this from you, but well, you'll understand in a minute." Daphne pulled her over to a couple of chairs in the classroom. "I guess I'll just jump to the end to spare you. I've got a boyfriend and he's not a Slytherin."

Tracey smiled. "That was my favorite theory, especially when you started missing Saturday night study time. So who is he?" she asked with excitement in her voice.

Daphne looked nervously at her hands for a few seconds before she looked at her friend. "I'm sorry to have to do this, but I need a secrecy promise. You can't tell anyone, and I mean anyone, until next September."

"What?!"

"I'm serious, Tracey. We really like each other, but there would be some very big problems if it were known we were dating," she said in a deadly serious tone.

"Like what?" Tracey asked.

"Like people could get hurt or killed," Daphne solemnly told her. "If you want to know who, then I need the promise."

Tracey stared at her for a moment before she nodded. "OK, just for you. I promise I won't tell anyone about your boyfriend, who he is, or that you even have one until next September or you tell me otherwise. How's that?"

A smile graced Daphne's face. "Thank you, Tracey. You don't know how much I've wanted to share this with you, but I just couldn't."

Tracey rolled her eyes. "The way you're talking, it sounds like you're dating someone like ... oh -- Harry Potter."

Daphne gave her friend a very big smile. "Lucky guess or are you just playing?"

"I'm just ... Wait, are you really dating Harry Potter?" Tracey's eyes looked like they were about to fall out of her head. Daphne calmly nodded. "No way! You wouldn't do that. You're a Slytherin and he's a Gryffindor."

With a wave of her hand as it to knock it away, Daphne showed her opinion of that idea. "Those are just labels. When you get to know him, you'll find that he's a pretty nice guy."

"I don't believe it. You're only teasing me," Tracey protested. "Who is it really?"

Behind her, Harry quietly pulled his Cloak off and put it in a robe pocket while Tracey was objecting. "Would it help if I kissed her?" he asked mischievously.

Tracey yelped and spun around, surprise written all over her face. She blankly watched Harry walk around her and kiss Daphne. "I don't believe it," the brunette whispered.

"Believe it," Daphne told her friend after Harry's lips parted from hers. "He's a very good kisser too." She gave her boyfriend a quick kiss. "So now you know my big secret, but you can't tell."

After a moment, Tracey started laughing. "No, I won't, but not only because I promised, but because I don't think anyone would believe me." She shook her head in amusement. "So, Potter, what do your friends think of this?"

Harry chuckled. "They don't know yet. I'll probably tell them just before school starts next year. I need to protect Daphne as I always seem to get into trouble. Once we return to school, I'll be able to do that; but this summer could be hard, so we're hiding our relationship for now."

The brunette continued to shake her head. "Completely unbelievable. You'll be the topic everyone talks about when this gets out."

"I know," Daphne agreed. "That's why we're keeping this a secret for now." Tracey nodded. "Since you know, if you don't mind, I need to tell Harry something privately."

"Sure, no problem, Daphne." Tracey chuckled to herself again. "This is some secret... Oh, one last question," she said as she got up. "How long have you been dating?"

"We had our first date the day after Valentine's day," Daphne answered.

Tracey groaned. "He's trustworthy, hot, and romantic. Where am I going find one of those?" She did not wait for an answer, but left.

Harry turned to look at his girlfriend in shock, who was smirking at him. She kissed him to start him going again. He shook his head. "I can't believe she said that. That's so not me..."

Daphne only laughed and recast the privacy charms, before she became more serious. "Harry, I have something for you." She dug into her robes and pulled out a small box and handed it to him.

Opening the box, he found three small phials of a very dark potion and one phial of a milky potion. "What are they?"

"Three of them are Draught of Living Death," she said simply.

He crooked an eyebrow at her. "OK," he drawled. "What is your plan for these?"

"How you do it will take Gryffindor courage, so I leave that part to you. But if you can somehow get one of these into Voldemort, then I believe you will have fulfilled the prophecy. He will be vanquished and then you can take your time dealing with those Horcrux things you told me about not long ago."

"Uh, yeah ... Hmm, talk about an impossible mission." Harry shook his head. "So, why three of them?"

"That gives you some flexibility to put it in a cup or something, and if it's not drunk, then you can try again; or if you meet some of the inner circle members, you can use the extras on them. I put an Unbreakable charm on the phials too." She added the last part as an after thought.

"So, what you're telling me is that I need to get Voldemort to drink one of these, and then I have to hide him very carefully so no one can find him, and that allows me time to destroy all the Horcruxes before I revive him and kill him."

Daphne shook her head. "Close. You don't have to revive him first, just deal a mortal blow, like cutting his head off."

"Yeah, I suppose that would do it. Why did you pick this method? It sounds hard to do. I mean, how do I get him to take the potion?" He studied her intently.

She shrugged. "I have no idea, but it seemed like your biggest problem was lack of time, either to train or to find the Horcruxes..."

"Or both," he interjected.

"Or both," she agreed. "This gives you time, and potentially more than you'll ever need. If you never find all the Horcruxes and you've hidden the body well, you may never have to deal with him again. He'd be like that forever. The antidote is very hard to make correctly. Normally, only someone who has their mastery in Potions will be able to brew it."

"And what is the other potion? I don't think we've ever made one like that in class."

"It's a Potion of Compulsion. You can think of it like an Imperious curse, but it's not as strong. While not quite illegal, you would receive some pretty close scrutiny if you were caught using it. I thought it might be helpful if you needed some extra help in accomplishing your task," she explained.

Harry considered that for a moment. "Oh, you mean like using it on a Death Eater to have insider help?"

"That was what I was thinking, but there might be other ways. You'll have to decide while you're doing your task." She shrugged as if not sure what else to say. "I'm sorry Harry, that's the best I could come up with."

"Don't worry about it, that's more than anyone else has done for me," Harry told her with a gentle smile. He carefully closed the small box up and put it in a pocket. "I'll keep these with me as much as possible so I have them if the opportunity ever arises."

"I'd shrink the box to make it less obvious," she suggested. "I'd continue to always keep your special Cloak with you too, if I were you."

"Good idea. I also think I need to talk to Professor Flitwick about hiding charms." Probably the Fidelius, he thought to himself, maybe some wards for hiding too.

She smiled and wrapped him in her arms. "Good idea," she echoed him. "But a better idea would be to kiss your girlfriend for helping you." Harry happily complied.

((A/N: Well, just one chapter left and I think everything is setup and in place. The next chapter is mostly action: physical and confrontation; and there is an epilogue at the end.))

Chapter 4

Harry was not totally sure how he had done it, but somehow, despite all the poison the Headmaster had drank that evening, Harry had managed to Apparate the old man back to Hogsmeade, then fly him back to the front door of the school. Even after all of that, the old man was still alive -- barely. Fortunately, Professor McGonagall had met them at the door. Following the Headmaster's barely coherent ramblings, she directed Harry to levitate the Headmaster to the hospital wing while she went to fetch Professor Snape.

As Harry levitated the Headmaster to the hospital wing, he thought about how the evening had started.

The Headmaster had approached him as dinner was ending and asked Harry to come with him to his office. There, the old wizard had spent nearly an hour convincing Harry that while they might not see various events the same way, they were on the same side and only if they worked together could Voldemort be defeated. Harry was certain he did not agree with everything the Headmaster said, but Harry did agree that he had a greater chance of success in getting rid of Voldemort if he let the Headmaster help him, as long as the Headmaster did not do anything too stupid and put Harry at unnecessary risk.

So once again they were working together on defeating Voldemort. To show Harry that he was serious about working with Harry, the Headmaster offered to let Harry come on a mission to retrieve a Horcrux. After going to a cave on the coast and battling various traps, including an underground lake containing Inferi, Harry was glad the Headmaster was with him. The worst trap of the evening was a large amount of poison guarding the Horcrux, which Dumbledore drank to be able to retrieve the cursed item. That was how they were in this horrible mess. Now, not only did the Headmaster have a hand that was all but dead from a curse he triggered last summer, he had so much poison in him it looked doubtful that he would live.

Reaching the hospital wing, he saw that McGonagall and Snape were already there. Pomfrey took Dumbledore from Harry and put him on a bed. Snape looked at Pomfrey's diagnostics and then forced a bezoar

down Dumbledore's throat. Dumbledore pulled the goblet he had drank the poison from and Snape took it to analyze the poison stuck to the inside to try to create an antidote.

At that moment, McGonagall pulled him aside. "Mr Potter. What can you tell me about this? I need to know as much as possible so we can save him."

"I'm sorry, Professor, but all I can say is that he took me on a trip, and during the trip he ended up drinking a lot of poison. I can't tell you what kind of poison, other than I expect it to be really bad."

She frowned at him, giving Harry a very severe look. "Then where did you find this poison?"

"I'm really sorry, Professor, but the Headmaster made me promise not to say anything. He said it was very important that this remain a secret."

McGonagall tried several other ways to get information out of him, but Harry held fast. As he left the hospital wing, he heard Snape say he had found out what the poison was and that he could brew an antidote. Unfortunately, the Headmaster was going to be in the hospital wing for the rest of June and probably into July. It was only the first week of June now, with final exams to start Monday after next, or in nine days. Harry was glad it was not him stuck in here for so long. The nurse would probably drive him insane.

Harry explained to his friends a version that was only slightly longer than what he had told McGonagall. Hermione was not pleased to get so few details, but she relented when he told her about his promise. For reasons he could not explain, he told Daphne a medium length version of what happened. When he showed her the locket for the fake Horcrux, Daphne voluntarily took the project of figuring out who R.A.B. was, since they both believed that person was who had the real Horcrux now.

Once "business" was taken care of, Harry and Daphne spent the rest of the time as boyfriend and girlfriend. She also let him get to know her a little better physically. All of their clothes stayed on, but Harry

felt so happy, felt so loved, and felt so close to her, that he was sure his Patronus would be record-sized if he were to cast one now.

One hard truth hit him later that night as he went to bed: War was ugly and he was going to have to do some ugly things he would not normally do if he was going to win. He was very thankful he had Daphne on his side to help. He was sure he would need her before all of this was over.

It was late on the Saturday afternoon just before exams started, almost a week after Dumbledore had been poisoned.

The good news was that Dumbledore would live. The bad news is that he was so weak, he would be there until July and the teachers had to go to the hospital wing to talk to him.

More good news was that Quidditch season had finished for the year, so Harry met Daphne at three and they got to spend two glorious hours together. In addition to talking and snogging, they started relaxing their Occlumency barriers for each other and shared thoughts directly. In addition to helping each get to know the other, it increased their passion. The feelings they each were having for the other was reaching new heights -- as it had their last two times together.

A few minutes before dinner was to start, they left their meeting spot, Daphne first. Harry followed behind her by a few minutes. As he was entering the Great Hall, he glanced up at the Head Table and noticed Snape suddenly grasp his left forearm for a few seconds, and then attempt to leave the room as inconspicuously as possible.

Deciding this might be the opportunity he was looking for; he backed into the Entrance Hall and quickly walked towards the side hallway where he knew Snape would come out. Not seeing anyone around, he pulled out his Invisibility Cloak and put it on. Thinking that maybe Snape would be the inside help he would need, he also pulled out his little box of potions and expanded it. He pulled out the milky colored one and put the box away.

He walked around a corner and saw Snape coming his way. Carefully, he moved to the side so Snape would not run into him and drew his wand. As Snape walked past him at a brisk pace, Harry poked his wand out of his cloak and non-verbally cast, "Imperio". He felt only a little guilt for hitting his greasy haired tormentor in the back.

The potions master immediately stiffed, moving in very slow motion to try and pull his wand out. Harry could feel the man mentally resisting and pushed his will harder into to the spell. After a few seconds, Snape stopped moving his hand towards his wand. Holding the potion out, so it appeared to be floating in mid-air, Harry whispered, "Drink the potion."

Snape was still fighting him, but the man's hand slowly moved out, grabbed the potion, and then drank it. It only took about ten seconds before Harry noticed Snape was barely fighting his spell at all.

With a smile, Harry whispered. "Turn around and go into that classroom." Snape did and Harry followed him and closed the door so they were alone. Keeping the spell going, he gave Snape his orders. "You will not resist my commands and you will answer my questions."

Snape slowly nodded.

"Have you been summoned and are you on your way to see Voldemort?"

"Yes," the man slowly drawled.

"How do you get there?"

"I leave the school grounds and take a Portkey."

Good, Harry thought. "Will the Portkey take more than one person?"

"Yes."

This was coming together nicely, he mused. "Why do you think you're being called?"

"The Dark Lord has not been feeling well and probably needs some more potions."

"Oh? What kinds of potions?" Ideas were racing through Harry's head now.

"Some special strengthening potions."

"When did he start feeling poorly?"

"Last Saturday afternoon and last Wednesday evening too."

Harry considered that and the schedule fit his too well and he had to wonder. Well, if the Dark Lord could affect him, Harry saw no reason he could not affect Voldemort too. It really was almost funny. Realizing he had to get going, he told Snape. "I will go with you and you will not attack me; you will not tell anyone else I am with you; you will act as normally as possible around the other Death Eaters and the Dark Lord; but you will also do what I tell you to. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Very good. Start walking towards the front gates of the school."

Snape left at his usual brisk pace and Harry hurried after him. Realizing he could hear his footsteps, he quickly cast the Silencing charm on his feet. Snape seemed to pause, so Harry quickly told Snape to continue.

Once they were outside walking towards the gates and Harry saw no one else was visible, he decided to find out a few more things while he had the chance.

"Whose side are you on now: Dumbledore's or the Dark Lord's?" Harry really wanted to know this.

"Dumbledore's," came the clear answer, which surprised Harry.

"How long have you been on Dumbledore's side?"

"Since I became a spy."

Harry rolled his eyes at the mostly useless answer. "When did you become a spy?"

"The night the Dark Lord killed Lily Potter."

It was all Harry could do not to gasp. After he thought he could keep his voice steady, he asked, "Why did the death of Lily Potter cause you to become a spy?"

"Because I loved her and her death caused me to see that the Dark Lord really doesn't care about anything or anyone but himself."

Deciding he was in so deep there was no reason to stop, he asked, "Why do you hate Harry Potter?"

"Because he is James's Potter's son and looks so much like him that I can't help but see James in him, and I hated James Potter more than anyone."

Harry shook his head. So Snape really was just a supreme git who could not see that he was not his father. It appeared that Snape loved his mother and hated his father for getting her to marry him instead. What a horrible mess. Not able to think of anything else he had to know right then, he followed Snape in silence the rest of the way to the school gates.

At the gates, Harry asked the last few questions he thought he would need for a while. "What is your Portkey to get to the Dark Lord?"

"A quill."

"Are there any barriers, wards, or other magic that might stop me or cause me to be found because I don't have the Dark Mark?" He was concerned about this.

"No."

Harry smiled at his good fortune. "How do you normally get back to school?"

"I Portkey back to the gates and walk in."

"Hand me that return Portkey." Snape handed him an ink bottle, which Harry put in his robes. "How do you activate it?"

"Just touch your wand to it."

Outside the gates, Snape pulled out an eagle feather quill and his wand.

"Use your wand only to activate the Portkey," Harry commanded as he touched the quill.

Snape did just that and Harry felt the pull he hated so much behind his navel.

They arrived in an old manor house and it was all Harry could do not to fall down. He quickly stood up and went very still because there, not more than five feet away, was Lucius Malfoy.

"You're late, Severus," Malfoy drawled.

"I came as fast as I could. Where is the master?"

"In his room," Malfoy answered as he watched Snape carefully.

Snape left and Harry followed as inconspicuously as possible. Now that he was in the middle of this adventure, he wondered why he had thought this was a good idea before. He decided then and there that he really needed to tone down his "Gryffindors thoughts" and start listening to his inner-Slytherin more. The thought of using the last half of his "luck potion" also crossed his mind, but that was back in his trunk. He also considered that the "luck potion" might deem it luckier to avoid seeing the Dark Lord altogether, so maybe it was best he was not using it.

Up the stairs, Harry barely got into a big room before Snape closed the door. Fortunately, there was no one else in the room other than Voldemort, who was lying on a couch and looking very pale, even for him. His scar flared in pain for a second, before he slammed his Occlumency barrier into place, which reduced the pain to a bearable trickle.

"Sssnape, you imbecccile, what took you sssso long," the Dark Lord hissed.

The potions master went over and kneeled before the Dark Lord. "I am sorry, my master. I had trouble getting away, but I came as fast as I could."

"Give me my potionsss! That Potter brat is making me feel sssick again!"

Snape dug a potion phial out and as Voldemort was about to drink it, Harry silently cast, "Petrificus Totalus". The Dark Lord went completely stiff. Snape turned to look at where the spell came from, so Harry stunned the man.

Harry took a deep breath, hardly believing his impromptu plan was working so far. He quickly cast silencing charms all around the room. Now came the tricky part. He wished he had one more of the Compulsion Potions, but he would just have to wing this one.

Then an idea hit him; he almost slapped his forehead for being so stupid and forgetting his charms. With determination, he cast a Compulsion charm at the 'man' in front of him and gave him the very strong urge to cooperate. For good measure, Harry cast the charm again, this time with the compulsion to tell the truth. Wishing for the best, he freed Voldemort's face so he could talk.

"Who are you and what are you doing?" Voldemort demanded.

Walking over to the couch, Harry, still hidden under his cloak, cast "Imperio" on the Dark Lord. Since he had been able to break this curse in the graveyard, Harry hoped he could win this mind battle too.

The resistance and backlash was incredible. If he thought controlling Snape had been hard, this was much more difficult. It took him several minutes to win control, but in the end Harry managed to hold Voldemort under and control him.

"Tom Riddle, tell me about your Horcruxes, where they are hidden, the traps around them, and how to get past the traps," Harry commanded. The next fifteen minutes were spent listening very carefully. Harry knew he would probably have to borrow or buy a Pensieve later to use to review this conversation so that he did not forget anything said.

When Riddle finished, Harry asked him, "Can I use a Portkey to get out of this room or must I be at the entry point downstairs?"

"You can Portkey out of thisss room from in front of thisss fireplace."

An inspiration came to Harry, one he knew he should have already asked. "Name all the Death Eaters." Voldemort started listing them and Harry counted thirty-seven by the time the man was done. He would see what he could do about that list later. There was one more question he really needed the answer to. "Name all the Death Eaters you've ever had whose last name started with the letter 'B'." It was a short list and only one of them had a first name that started with an 'R'.

Deciding that he had everything he needed, Harry forced Voldemort to drink one of Daphne's potions. The Dark Lord fell back as if asleep. Even an Enervate would not wake him. Harry looked at Snape and decided he was done with him too, so another of Daphne's potions was put to use. Harry could not bring himself to outright kill the man, but he decided Snape was too dangerous to be free, especially after subjecting him to the Imperius curse. Harry knew the greasy git would never forgive him for that and the retribution would be severe, and that was probably putting it mildly.

As Harry was levitating Voldemort over to the spot in front of the fireplace, he heard a hiss. Dropping the spell and the Dark Lord with a thud, he turned around just in time to see a huge snake come out of the wall. Knowing who that was, Harry threw a Cutting curse at the

snake and missed. He flipped over a chair to stand behind and tried again. The snake pulled back and avoided the curse. Harry swore to himself. Needing something with more of an area affect, he cast "Sectumsempra" with a slashing motion. A three foot long gash went across the floor, which included the snake's neck at the end of the slash. Its head fell off and it went still.

Panting hard in his excitement, Harry stood there and looked at the thing. It must have been twelve foot long, easily. Idiot snake! Oh well, that saved him one more mission in the future, as there was a Horcrux inside Nagini.

Harry levitated the snake and its head over so it lay on top of Voldemort. Snape was moved over and laid on top of the pile and all three were tied together. As he was about to leave, a knock sounded at the door.

He cursed his bad luck and made sure his Cloak was all the way on. Then he Disillusioned his pile of bodies, took the silencing spell off the door as he walked over to stand by it. In what he hoped was a passable impersonation of the Dark Lord, he hissed, "Enter".

The door opened and Bellatrix Lestrange walked in. He could not decide whether to be happy or swear as he watched one of the most powerful Death Eaters enter the room. As she passed him, he did a simple Stunning spell non-verbally and watched her drop. Again not bothered that he had hexed someone in the back, but only because she was far from innocent, and his inner-Slytherin told him it was the expedient thing to do. Quickly he closed the door behind her. He stunned her again for good measure and then added her to the top of his pile of bodies and tied her in. He hoped the Portkey could handle four people and a giant snake.

To give the Death Eaters one last present, besides taking their master, he whispered several Fireball spells, directing them around the room. Slipping his hand under some of the ropes and holding the Portkey in that hand, Harry touched his wand to the little bottle and away he went. A few seconds later, he was pleased to see the gates of Hogwarts in the semi-darkness as well as a pile of bodies in front of him.

With a small Severing charm, Harry cut the ropes on the pile and then Apparated each of the three people to the coast, where Dumbledore had taken him a week ago. By the time he transported the last one, he was getting very tired, both physically and magically. Fortunately, he did not have much else to do, other than a few levitation spells.

In short order, he had all the bodies in the cave, using some of Bella's blood to open the portal in the rock. Inside, he took Voldemort, the snake carcass, and Snape to the island in the center of the underground lake, after making sure he had removed all items from them. He even Vanished all of their clothes, except for their boxers. Their two wands went into his pocket. He was pleased to find that Tom's wand worked just as well as his own did.

Back at the shore by the door, Harry searched Bella and happily found her wand and vault key. That meant he would not have to control her to find out when she had hidden it. With the key and as head of the Black family, he should be able to get into her vault and get one of the missing Horcruxes. Playing judge, jury, and executioner, Harry banished Bella out over the water, where she hit thirty feet from the shore. The reaction of the Inferi was instantaneous. He doubted she had ever woken from being stunned, which was a lot more humane than she deserved.

Leaving the cave, Harry inscribed four small runes around the door. A power-charging rune was added in the center to keep the next charm strong. Finally, Harry cast the Fidelius over the portal, connecting it to the runes, making himself the Secret Keeper. Since it was over such a small area, it did not take much power. To everyone who came here, it was now a solid rock wall. He was very glad he had taken the time to get Flitwick to teach him this method of protection.

Satisfied that Voldemort was taken care of for the time being, Harry Apparated back to the gates of his school. Very wearily he walked across the grounds and to the kitchens. Dobby found him instantly.

"Harry Potter, Sir. Can Dobby get you anything? Food? A place to sit?"

"Yeah, Dobby, I really need some help," Harry said breathily as he lean against the wall in his exhaustion. "I need a small snack I can eat as I walk and I really need you to take a message to Daphne. Can you do those things for me, please?"

"Easily. Wait here." Dobby turned around and grabbed a plate. A few snaps of the fingers later, items were flying across the kitchen. When he turned back around less than ten seconds later, a complete sandwich was on the plate. "A ham sandwich, Harry Potter Sir?"

"Thanks, Dobby, you're the greatest." He grabbed and bit into the sandwich; it was good. "You're brilliant, Dobby." The elf beamed and vibrated slightly in his happiness. "One more thing. Can you please find Daphne and quietly tell her so no one else hears, than I'm in our dinner place and need her to come and that it's urgent. I know it's almost curfew time, but I need her to help me tonight."

"Yes, Sir, Dobby takes Harry Potter Sir's message." With a pop, he was gone.

Harry threw the hood of his Invisibility Cloak up and trudged up to the seventh floor, eating the last half of his sandwich as he walked. He passed only one student hurrying back to his dorm room, but Harry's Cloak kept him hidden. On the seventh floor, he thought of a fully furnished safe place to sleep plus a bathroom. He had just opened the door when he heard running feet. Turning, he saw Daphne running with her school robes flying out behind her.

"Harry? Is that you?" she called out.

He lowered his hood. "Daph, I so am glad to see you, come on in," he told her with relief and exhaustion in his voice.

She helped him into the room and closed the door. "What's wrong? You look ... droopy. Sorry, but you look dead on your feet."

"That's because I am. Help me out of most of this stuff. I need to take a quick shower before I collapse."

A mischievous grin came over her. "I like that thought, but are we really ready for that?"

"No." He was too tired to tease her back. "I only need help to get me ready for a shower, then I need someone to hold me and tell me everything will be OK." He started trying to get his Cloak off and had trouble raising his arms. Daphne quickly started helping him until he was down to his boxers. He noticed silk pyjamas were on the bed, so he grabbed a set and went towards the bathroom. "I'll be back in a few minutes. You can change out here."

Daphne saw another set of pyjamas on the bed. Deciding to go along with everything for now, she quickly removed her clothes down to only her knickers and put on the silk sleepwear. She had to admit they were very nice, much like her normal pyjamas. She heard the water cut off and Harry came out a couple of minutes later, dragging himself over and crawling into bed. He put his wand and his glasses on the headboard above his head.

"Now tell me what's wrong, Harry," she coaxed him as she cuddled with him in bed. She was on her side looking at him and he was next to her.

"I'm so tired, Daph. I don't know that I've ever done this much magic in one night."

"Oh? What did you do?"

"Lots of Apparating including three long distance double-Apparations. And Daph, oh god, it was horrible. I cast the Imperius curse at least three times. I was so close and I had to complete my mission." He sniffled. "And I killed someone tonight, probably three people before it's all done." Harry broke down there, unable to talk anymore.

Daphne looked down and saw tears starting to roll down his cheek. "Ssh, there, there, Harry," she cooed. Daphne curled him into her so his head was on her shoulder. "Put your arm around my stomach and just hold on to me." Surprisingly, he did that without hesitation. He also started sobbing. "You did what you had to do, Harry, and it will

be all right. I've got you Harry and I'll watch over you while you sleep. Just sleep in my arms. You'll be safe with me."

She suspected he was having an attack from his conscience, so she held him tightly and did her best to reassure him. She also gently ran her fingers through his hair and rubbed his shoulder. "You did the right thing, Harry, and I still love you," she crooned to him over and over. It took a while, but eventually his sobs quieted down and he was breathing slow and shallow breaths. Daphne kissed the top of his forehead.

Daphne considered what little he had told her. It sounded like he had fulfilled his prophecy. If so, she was happy that was done and now maybe he could live a more normal life. He would never be completely normal -- he could not, he was Harry Potter. She smiled to herself as she considered encouraging him to become the Minister for Magic some day. There was no reason he could not after some time, maybe after a successful Quidditch career. Yes, they'd have to discuss the future this summer. Between the Potter estate and half the Greengrass estate when her parents passed on, she knew they would be able to lead a very comfortable life without ever working, if they wanted to.

That thought shocked her for a moment. Was she really thinking about marrying Harry Potter -- the Gryffindor Golden Boy? She laughed quietly for a moment. As she honestly considered the question, she realized she would be happy to be with Harry. They still had some things to discuss before marriage could be considered, but they had a good foundation with all the time they had spent talking.

Pulling Harry in a little tighter to her, she closed her eyes and wished the lights off. In the darkness, she dreamed of what life could be like with her Harry. He and she could be a powerful force...

The next morning, or really just before noon, Harry finally awoke. As he opened his eyes to a low light, he realized how comfortable he was, how warm he was, how good the air smelt -- just like Daphne. Then he saw a mound of silk in front of his face and his hand was on it. To make matters worse, the mound was alive as it was slowly going up and down. Realizing what had happened and hoping she

was still asleep, he slowly moved it down so it was resting on a much safer place -- her stomach.

"What's wrong, Harry?" came a soft voice from above his head. "Didn't you like holding me there? Do you know how many guys would like to do what you just gave up?"

Blushing heavily, he slowly tilted his head up and saw a smirking grin on his girlfriend's face. "I, uh, I loved it, Daph; but I think that the first time should be more, you know, special."

She chuckled. "That first time will be special, Harry, but this first time is mildly special in its own way. I know we've only slept with each other once now, but I really liked it. How about you?"

All he could do was nod, as he did not trust his voice not to squeak as he thought about "sleeping together".

"I'm glad," she said. "Now, tell me about last night. I inferred from your comments that you were successful. Were you?"

"Yeah. Riddle is sleeping away in a very guarded place under a Fidelius charm. I also know where all the Horcruxes are, or at least the original hiding places, and how to get around all the traps there. So now it's just a matter of taking care of them all then doing something with him. Probably the easiest thing will be what I did with Bella." He hung his head as he thought about what he had done with her. The evil and insane witch had deserved worse than she had received, but he still did not feel good about having to kill her.

"All right, we know the story has a happy ending. Tell me the whole story, Harry," she asked.

So Harry told her everything he had done and how he felt about it. He also told her he understood Dumbledore a little better about having to do things he did not like "for the greater good".

Daphne still held him tight. "Harry, it will be all right, trust me. I know you had to do things that you did not like, but they did help society. You've taken several murders and terrorists off the streets and saved

many lives. More importantly, you did it without hurting anyone else; all the innocents are safe. That's why you don't like what Dumbledore did, isn't it? He did his 'greater good' things at the expense of others, like your poor childhood."

He sniffled once. "I suppose you have a point."

She chuckled. "You know I'm right, Harry. Let your Slytherin think about it for a bit and you'll find that you agree with me." Daphne squeezed him tightly for a few seconds. "You know, you've done another greater good and didn't even realize it, I'll bet."

"What?" he asked with curiosity.

"Just think of how much better the school will be without Snape here," she told him with only the slightest of smiles. "All the jobs that require Potions will start to have a lot more applicants in the next few years."

Harry could not help it; he had to smile back at her. Then he started laughing. It was good to laugh and it was greatly needed. He stretched up and gently kissed her. "I don't know that I fully believe it yet, but thank you for helping me understand that it had to happen. I'm sure I'll believe it some day."

"Of course you will, Harry. I'll make sure you do," she fervently promised.

"You know, this means something else too," he told her with an expectant look in his eyes. He watched her but she shook her head when she could not figure it out. "It means we don't have to hide ourselves anymore."

"I like your thinking," she told him with a big smile. "But I still think we need to wait until after summer to make it public."

"Why?" he pouted. "Voldemort is gone..."

"True, but you have a list of Death Eaters. Let's find those Horcruxes and do something about those Death Eaters. If there's an Auror you'd

trust with your life, maybe we can give him the list. Or maybe..." she paused and thought about something for a moment.

"Or what?" He wondered what her Slytherin mind was considering.

"Or maybe we handle it ourselves. If your goal is to make sure there are no more Death Eaters, we might want to lure them someplace dangerous and then take care of them so they never bother anyone ever again, and there would be no way for them to escape with the 'I was under the Imperious' excuse." She made a face as she thought some more. "That would also mean we'd be getting rid of my sister's father-in-law, but I don't think she'd be too bothered. Her husband might be, but I really don't care." She had told him before that her sister had married Theo Nott's older brother, as an attempt to shield themselves by looking like they were sympathetic to the Dark Lord. To be best of her knowledge, her brother-in-law was not a Death Eater, although he had sympathies for the Dark Lord's political leanings.

"An interesting idea, I'll have to think about it." He looked at her. "Since you told Tracey, can I tell my friends on the last day of school? I'd like them to have the summer to get used to the idea of us."

"You think it will be that hard for them?"

Harry nodded. "Yeah, or at least for Ron. He's really against Slytherins just because of your house. Hermione will be surprised, but she'll probably come around pretty quickly. Neville will be the same way, I think. Ginny will probably be very cautious but accepting. Luna won't care at all."

"I think I have an idea for telling them, but I need to think about it and work out the details."

"OK," he agreed.

"We better get up. It may be Saturday, but it's still noon time. We've also got exams starting day after tomorrow and I need to study for them," she told him authoritatively.

"You sound like Hermione," he told her with a yawn as he rolled out of bed. "Hey look, my cloths are clean and folded."

"Dobby probably did them," she remarked as she got up and grabbed her clean and folded clothes. "I'll be in the bathroom. You can change in here this time." Ten minutes later, they parted, each going to their own dorm room to change clothes.

Harry walked into the common room just as his friends were about to leave.

"There you are, mate! Where have you been?!" It was hard to tell if Ron was more exasperated or angry.

It was easy to tell Hermione was angry. "Harry James Potter! Where have you been? Do you know how worried we've been? You haven't been to bed, you didn't leave us a note, you didn't tell anyone where you'd been, you..."

"Hermione!" he shouted to get her to shut up, which she did. Looking over, he saw that Ginny was glaring at him, while Neville was smirking amusedly and enjoying the scene, probably glad it was not him being yelled at, Harry thought.

He waved them over to a corner and put up a privacy spell. "This is one of those secret things, but I'll tell you that I was on another mission..."

"Harry! You can't do that! Professor Dumbledore is still in the hospital! Do you know..."

"Hermione!" She shut up again. "If you're going to go on and on like that, I won't say anything else." She huffed but did not object any more, at least for the moment. "I can't say much, but I will say that based on some good information, I retrieved another item that we've been looking for. That's all I can say for the moment, but I can probably tell you all the details later this summer."

"Why this summer, Harry?" Neville asked.

"Because I think we'll have reached a major turning point in the war by then and it won't matter if certain secrets are let out then or not. In the meantime, I'm playing things very close to the vest -- sorry," he told them with a shrug.

"As long as you aren't going off and trying to do all of this on your own," Hermione said, essentially accusing him of just that.

Harry almost told her he had help, but he realized at the last second that would be about the worst thing he could say to Hermione, as she would have felt left out. "How about we forget about the war for a while and go get lunch," Harry suggested.

"Sound good to me!" Ron led the group towards the Great Hall.

Harry noticed that Ginny was eying him carefully, as if she was trying to figure something out. He would have to be careful around her. He suspected she was smarter than she let on, or so his few conversations with her this year had led him to believe. Hermione was also scrutinizing him, but Harry shrugged it off and walked with Ron.

When the exams started on Monday, there was a general uproar going around the school. Most reactions fell into one of three categories: happiness, outrage, or worry. Professor Severus Snape was missing and no one seemed to have any idea where he was; and the two people who did know weren't saying anything.

The majority of the school, including some of the professors, was happy he was gone. After all, he was the most hated professor in the history of the school.

A few Slytherin were spouting conspiracy theories about how their head of house had been unwillingly taken away by someone, probably the Ministry. Unbeknownst to them, they were right, even if they had the wrong abductor and were making the story up as they went. Most of the Slytherins acted like they did not care whether he was gone or not, but if they had been honest, they would have said they too were happy he was gone.

Some teachers were worried about what had happened to their colleague. For most of them, they were worried that if something could happen to Severus, it could happen to them too. A few were worried because without him there, they would have to cover for him in regards to his classes and his exams. Only one was worried for the man's safety and sanity. That man made a request to his Deputy, who fetched a student to him.

Harry was escorted into the hospital wing by Professor McGonagall, who led him over to a screened off bed. It held a very frail looking man with a blackened hand. Harry pulled his Occlumency barriers up; it was habit with the Headmaster now. "You asked to see me, sir?"

"Yes, Harry." The Headmaster sounded very old and tired. "First, I must thank you for helping me back. I'm quite sure that I would not have continued in this life if not for your actions."

"You're welcome, sir," Harry said gravely. "In some ways, I'm truly sorry I obeyed you, but I guess it will all work out all right in the end."

"I understand, my dear boy. Do you have the item we were after?"

Harry gave him a grim smile. "I do, but it was a fake. Someone with the initials of R.A.B. beat us there." He glanced at McGonagall and noted that she seemed most puzzled. Well, that was the Headmaster's problem, he decided.

Dumbledore nodded. "I see. I shall give that some thought."

Harry said nothing. After his conversation with Voldemort, he knew that it was Sirius's brother. He hoped it was still in the Black family house and that Kreacher had it. If not, he would order Kreacher to find it for him.

"You will, of course, need to continue to search for it, Harry," Dumbledore said, "and the rest of them," he added softly.

"Of course, sir." Harry saw no need to say he knew where the rest should be, especially since McGonagall was standing there and giving him strange looks.

"Now Harry, I understand Professor Snape had to leave Saturday night to go to his other job, as it were. I also understand that you were not at dinner that evening. Do you know what might have happened to him?"

He felt no intrusion attempts, but he could see the Headmaster peering intently at him. "If you're asking about visions, I can tell you that I did not have one Saturday. I can say that my scar was bothering me that evening, so I skipped dinner. That usually only happens when Voldemort is upset, so perhaps something happened to Snape while he was out doing his other job." Harry was proud of himself for his calmness and his carefully worded statement, although he was very careful to keep his expression the same.

"Perhaps. I guess we shall have to be patient for a while longer. If you should see anything, please let me know."

"As you wish, sir." He turned to his head of house. "Professor, if Snape has not returned by Wednesday, may I take my Defense exam with my normal class?"

"You may, Mr Potter," she told him. "If he has returned by then, I shall give it to you that evening."

"Thank you, Professor. If there's nothing else, I have a Charms exam shortly." McGonagall dismissed him. He turned and left, smiling only after he had left the hospital wing.

Of all of his friends, only Hermione was the least bit concerned for Snape's absence, and even she was not overly bothered as she did not regard him as a very good teacher. Ron was ecstatic because, as he proclaimed, "one dead Slytherin is good start." Harry just shook his head at his friend's attitude.

Harry woke up early on the last day of school. He was already packed and ready to go, even though he had no plans to ride the train back to London. McGonagall had given him a note saying that his relatives would be at the station as usual to pick him up, a note he had pocketed without protest or even comment. Harry had mentally

laughed at the idea of them standing there while he had no plans of ever showing up. He was never going back to the Dursleys again. He did not care what Dumbledore or McGonagall wanted in that area of his life.

Besides the fact that he knew that Voldemort was no longer a problem, some of the Death Eaters were no longer a problem either. It had taken over a week for the news to leak out, but a story finally appeared in the Daily Prophet about how a fire had broke out at Malfoy Manor and over half of the house had been destroyed. To make manners worse, when Ministry workers had shown up to help put out the fire, several of the escaped Death Eaters were found, including both of the Lestrange brothers. They had been near death from smoke inhalation, unable to escape the fire due to being drunk. Now that they were back in Azkaban, there were calls for them to receive the Dementor's Kiss so they could not escape again.

Because of the circumstances, Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy were both in custody and under investigation. Harry wondered what would happen to the Malfoys, now that all three of them were in Azkaban, which he found very amusing. Harry was very happy that Draco Malfoy was no longer in school, now that his Slytherin girlfriend was about to be publicly known. The former sixth-year had received a thirty-year sentence, which Harry doubted the Dementors would let him complete sane or alive.

Double-checking that he had everything packed except for his Invisibility Cloak, his Map, and his Firebolt, Harry shrunk his trunk and put it in his pocket. With the other items in hand, he left the dorm room while his room mates were still waking up.

When Ron came down into the common room twenty minutes later, he found Harry standing in the middle of the room looking around. "Harry! What's up? What are you doing standing there like that?"

"Just looking around and thinking," Harry replied casually. "Have you ever wondered what all the other common rooms look like?"

Ron chuckled. "Well, we've seen the Slytherin one. It was pretty ugly."

Harry laughed. "Yeah, I didn't care for their colors, but I suspect they wouldn't care for our colors if they came here."

"They better not!" Ron was adamant.

"But why not? It really wouldn't hurt." Harry paused and looked at Ron. "I'd like to see the Ravenclaw's and the Hufflepuff's common room too. I think I'll do that next year," he said very thoughtfully.

"You're mental," Ron quietly commented. "Say, why do you have your broom with you? We don't have time to go flying today."

Harry looked up to see Neville coming down the boy's stairs and Hermione and Ginny coming down the girls' stairs. They were all coming over to him and Ron. He just smiled at his friend and slowly walked over to the big window nearby. "I thought I'd fly home," he calmly said as he opened the window.

"What?!" he heard loudly, shouted from four pairs of lungs. The few others in the common room looked in the group's direction, so Harry pulled out his wand and cast a privacy spell. The other Gryffindors shook their heads and went out the portrait hole for breakfast.

"I said I'm going to fly home, or wherever I end up staying for the summer." Harry watched them for their reaction and was not disappointed. It was chaos for a moment, but Harry did have to agree that it was amusing, just as predicted.

Hermione's voice broke through the roar of comments and yelled as he predicted she would. "Harry James Potter! You can't do that! It's not safe! What do you think Dumbledore would say?"

Harry surprised them all and laughed. "Hermione? I love you for the logical way you usually look at life, but please, for all of our sakes, please stop yelling about things you don't know everything about." As she started to say something again, he reached out and put one finger over her lips, which caused her to shut up in surprise.

"First," Harry told them, "it's my life not Dumbledore's. He's dictated enough things in my life and I'm not going to let him any more. I truly could care less what he thinks about what I do for the summer. I'm going to enjoy my summer before I return on September the first for my last and best year here. And no one can tell me otherwise. I am basically seventeen now, and will be officially in a little over a month."

"But Harry," Ron sounded very confused, "you've never done that before."

"You're absolutely right, Ron, and it's a crime that I haven't," he said with a chuckle. "So I'm going to have fun my way..."

"But it's not safe, Harry," Hermione objected. "You know Professor Dumbledore only has your best interest in mind."

"Hermione? Does Dumbledore dictate what your family does over the summer holidays?" She shook her head. "Nor does he tell any of the other students, and I see no reason for him to rule my life either."

"But Harry," he looked back at Ron, "I thought we three had something to do together this summer, for the war, you know?" Ron's facial expressions, as he tried to hint what he could not say, were funny.

"You mean our object hunt?" Harry asked, and received a nod from Ron. "There's no need to ruin your summer, Ron. Dumbledore and I have already found half of them and I know where the other half are and how to get past the traps, so I'll take care of them. There is no hurry." He shrugged as if it was no big deal.

"Harry!" Hermione huffed like a little child. "You can't go off on your own and do this, you need us. It will be dangerous to get those things and destroy them."

"What are you talking about?" Ginny demanded. Neville looked very curious too.

"In order to try to achieve immortality," Harry explained, "Voldemort created some Horcruxes..."

"Harry! You said it was supposed to be a secret!"

"Relax, Hermione. I trust Ginny and Neville." He looked at Neville and Ginny. "You two have to promise to tell no one this secret." They both nodded, so he turned back to Hermione. "There, now you can explain it all to them on the train, after you put up appropriate privacy spells. If all goes well, I'll have the last of them by the end of next week."

"How, Harry? You said they were guarded in very dangerous ways." Hermione glared at him.

"True," Harry mostly agreed, "but if you know Parseltongue and know what's there, you can safely get to the object. From there, it should be a simple matter of destroying them. I think I can do it with the Sword of Gryffindor, or else Dumbledore can do it when he's feeling better. It really doesn't matter anymore, as for all intents and purposes, the prophecy has been fulfilled now."

"What?!" They all shouted again and Harry smiled at their reaction.

"Explain Harry," Hermione commanded him.

"Don't let your knickers get in a twist, Hermione." The girl looked embarrassed for a second, before her "explain" look returned. "OK, you all remember when I disappeared for an evening and then sleep for half of the next day just before the exams started?" They all nodded. "I fulfilled the prophecy that night. The first line says: The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches. What does vanquish mean?"

Everyone looked at Hermione. "It means to conquer, to defeat, or to overcome," she said.

"And so I have overcome and conquered him," Harry simply stated.

"Harry, you have to tell us more than that. Did you, uh, kill him?" Hermione looked like she had eaten something very distasteful.

"Uh, not quite, but close enough. The very short version is that when Snape was called to Voldemort's side, I went with him under my invisibility cloak. Once I was there, I forced Voldemort to tell me about the Horcruxes and then I gave him a Draught of Living Death." Everyone gasped. "Then I took him to a very secure location and hid the only entrance to it under a Fidelius charm that I'm the Secret Keeper to and no one else knows the secret. So you see, he's not going anywhere and I can easily get all the Horcruxes." Harry smiled at his story, not explaining that much of his success was due to Daphne's plan and support.

"Then you know where Professor Snape is," Hermione exclaimed.

"I do. He's keeping Voldemort company." When Hermione opened her mouth, Harry quickly went on. "And he's staying right where he is for now. If I decide to forgive him for what he did to me over the years, I can retrieve him."

"But Harry, he's on our side."

"So?" Ron sarcastically answered her. "I agree with Harry. Let Snape stay where he is. We're all better off." In order to derail Hermione's arguments, Ron quickly changed the subject. "Harry, since you aren't going to go to the Dursleys, aren't you going to come to the Burrow and stay with us?"

Harry found it very interesting that Ginny seemed very interested in his answer, much more so than his other revelations. "Thanks for the invitation, Ron, and I might stop by for a short visit, but right now I plan to spend as much time as possible with my girlfriend." He was not disappointed with their reaction to that revelation either.

"Your what?" Again, it seemed to be the whole group together.

"My girlfriend, you know a female significant other that I'm very fond of, like to snog, could stare at her beauty for hours, enjoy talking to, am convinced she'd look really hot in a bikini on the beach..." He felt a small poke in his side, but he ignored it.

"Harry!" This time it was Ginny who interrupted him. "Who?" she asked when he looked at her.

"Well, I've been dating Daphne Greengrass for most of the term..."

"What?! A Slytherin? Are you out of your bloody mind?" Ron seemed to be on the verge of a stroke based on how red his face was. "You can't date a Slytherin, Harry. You're a Gryffindor." It was a sign as to how shocked Hermione was as she did not admonish Ron for his language.

Harry shook his head for a moment before he calmly went on. "Ron. You're my best friend. As your best friend I need to tell you that you need to grow up. Stop thinking in terms of labels and putting people in boxes like Malfoy does."

Ron did not miss the implication. "I am NOT like Malfoy!"

Harry was pleased his friend had not missed the main point. "I'll give you that you're too good to hex someone in the back, and you don't call Muggleborns a Mudblood, and you don't strut. But ignoring those and a few other actions, you think just like he does Ron." Ron stood there gaping at Harry in obvious disbelief and slowly turning redder in his anger. He noticed that Ginny did not seem to like what he was saying about Ron either. "Ron, you put labels on people and then you decide how they should and should not act, and how to treat them, based on those labels. You just stated the most obvious example: All Slytherins are bad."

"Well they are," Ron stated.

"No they're not. Look at Professor Slughorn. I don't like his Slug Club, but he's not a bad person as he treats all of us like human beings in his class. Auror Moody is a Slytherin, did you know that?"

"No." Ron was not quite so confident now.

"Professor Vector on the staff here and several people in Dumbledore's special organization are also Slytherins. You should also remember that not all Gryffindors are good. Does the name

Peter Pettigrew mean anything to you? It does to me." Harry stared at his friend.

"But I'm not like Malfoy!" Ron was still very red in the face.

"You're biased just like he is, but in the opposite way of course. In fact, if I took your argument and swapped Gryffindor in for Slytherin and Hermione in for Daphne, plus added a few insults, that would have been like something right out of Malfoy's mouth." Harry saw Hermione give a small resigned nod. "If you weren't prejudiced in your beliefs, you would not be making such a big deal of me dating a Slytherin; you'd be happy for me instead."

"Mental you are," Ron muttered.

"You hate Slytherins just as much as Malfoy hates Gryffindors. Cool down and think about it later. Have Hermione explain it to you. I can tell that she understands what I'm saying." Hermione glared at him, obviously not wanting to get in the middle of that argument.

"And Ron, this is exactly what the Sorting Hat keeps singing about every year. This is why there is no unity in the school. Practically everyone puts labels on everyone else. It's why so many people think I'm a monster when something bad happens, even when they have no proof. They hear a rumor and believe the worst. The reason why is they've already labeled me as different and therefore someone to blame. They put me in a box I don't belong in." Harry shook his head at the injustice of it all. "Oh well, only one more year of it. I suppose I need to go so I can enjoy my summer."

"Wait, Harry," Ron called out. "There's another reason you can't date Greengrass, a much better reason."

"Oh?" Harry asked with a smirk. This ought to be good, he thought, especially considering how nervous Ron suddenly looked.

"Yeah, you can't date her because, well, because you're suppose to be with Ginny."

Harry stared in shock wondering where that came from.

Ginny yelled, "Ron!"

"Ginny, you know you want him," her brother explained. "It's supposed to work out that way." Ginny was very red, whether from embarrassment or anger, it was tough to tell. It could have been both.

Harry just shook his head at the amusing situation. "Well Ron, that's not the way it worked out." He smiled and turned to Ginny. "Ginny, you are a nice person and I've enjoyed talking to you this year and getting to know you. I'm happy to call you a friend. I might even have asked you out if the timing had been better. But you were seeing Dean when I was free, and I was seeing Daphne when you were free." He shrugged. "If Daphne decides she doesn't like me one day, I'll see if you're free, but don't wait on me. Enjoy your life and if you find a good guy, date him. You're a nice person and I'd hate to see you wait on me when that might not ever happen."

Ginny still seemed a little embarrassed and angry, but she slowly nodded. Hopefully she really was over him as Hermione had told him last year in Hogsmeade.

"Thanks, Harry. I've really enjoyed getting to know the real you." Ginny paused for a moment and swallowed, as if searching for her courage. "And Harry, if Daphne does break up with you, please let me know. We can discuss things. I think I've grown up enough to know that maybe it would work, but then again, maybe not."

Her words made him feel much better. He nodded gratefully to her.

"But I've been trying to get you two together," Ron complained, not giving up yet, although his voice and the color of his face was starting to return to normal

Ginny stared at her brother in surprise while Harry laughed. "Riiight," he drawled. "Sorry, Ron, but it didn't look like that to me. In fact, you were playing the protective big brother role so well, I thought you didn't want anyone to date her." Now Ginny glared at her brother, who decided to examine his shoes. Harry wondered how explosive the next conversation between brother and sister would be.

"Harry?" He looked at Hermione when she softly called his name.
"Where are you going to go this summer?"

He smiled. "I don't fully know yet. I know I need to meet Daphne's parents as I need to ask their permission before I..."

"You what?" Ron yelled as his face went red again.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Ron, will you please quit overreacting."

Ron sputtered for a second. "But -- but, you're going to marry her after a few months? What did she do, give you a love potion?"

Harry wanted to search for a big stick and see if he could beat some sense into Ron. "What are you talking about? We've haven't discussed that at all, or at least I don't remember it."

"But you said you were going to ask her parent's permission," Ron argued.

"Yeah," Harry confirmed. "I want to take her traveling with me for the summer and I thought it would be a good idea to ask her parents if she can go with me."

"Oh, sorry," Ron apologized lamely.

Harry shook his head again before he turned to his other long time friend. "Anyway, Hermione, you've described some interesting places with all of your trips over the years, so I thought I might go visit some of those places, find a nice beach somewhere, find ... I don't know, just fun places to go and relax. You know, forget all of the stupidity I've had to deal with here." He almost looked at Ron as he said the last part, but managed to restrain himself.

"I still can't believe you're going with a Slytherin," Ron muttered, and received a glare from Harry.

"You're such an idiot, Ron," Neville quietly commented.

Ron glared at Neville while Harry smiled at his quiet friend.

"Ron, have you stopped to think about who you're talking to?" Neville asked. "Not only is he supposed to be your best friend, who you should be supporting, but he's Harry Bloody Potter, recent Vanquisher of a certain Dark Lord and Sneering Snape. How many other people do you know who are magically powerful enough to do that? And you're questioning his choice of a girlfriend? He can have almost any girl he wants and he found Greengrass good enough that he chose her. Have you been hit too many times in the head with a Bludger, Ron? Geez..."

Harry enjoyed the mini-speech. Neville was usually quiet, but when he came out of his shell, look out. Then Harry had a great idea on how to finish the whole conversation, and he knew Daphne would like this. "Ron, if Daphne was standing right here," he pointed to the empty spot next to his left side, "what would you say to her?"

"Now?" Ron almost squeaked as he was put on the spot.

"Yes, Ron, right here and right now. What would you say to her face?" Harry calmly looked at his friend. He was quite sure what was going to happen. The only question was who was going to pound Ron on the back when he choked.

"That's easy, I'd tell her that she's not good enough for you, that she doesn't deserve you," he said confidently.

Harry's eyes bugged out. "You'd say that when you don't even know her?"

"Yeah," Ron said confidently.

"Go ahead, say whatever you want," Harry said sadly. "Maybe he'll listen to you."

"What are you on about?" Ron asked just as another person appeared just to the left and slightly behind Harry. It was a girl with honey blonde hair dressed in a green top and stylish jeans. Her clothes were tight enough to indicate that she had a very nice figure.

The look on her face was not so nice, and her blue eyes glared intensely at the red-headed boy.

"You really are a work, Ron Weasley."

"Greengrass?" Ron weakly got out as he went pale and seemed to have trouble breathing. Hermione shook him slightly to try and get him to remember to take a breath.

Harry was pleased to see Neville enjoying the moment as he silently laughed. Harry decided that he'd definitely visit Neville this summer.

"Oh, very good, Weasley," Daphne said sarcastically, before she turned to Ginny. "Sorry, I don't mean you. You're all right in my book." She turned back to the other. "Ron, to use your own words, you're not good enough to be Harry's friend, you don't deserve to have a good friend like him. You're really need to think about what he told you. Labels are meaningless; it's the person that counts."

Daphne's hands went to her hips, and her glare seemed to intensify a little more. "Also, let me tell you something. I know Draco Malfoy better than any of you, unfortunately, and you, Ron Weasley, are more like that pompous little ass than you know. Come on, Harry. I'm hungry and I don't want to have breakfast here. Glasgow is not too far away. We can eat there and then decide what we want to do."

Just because he could, and to tweak Ron, Harry snaked an arm around Daphne's waist, pulled her in, and gave her a kiss, and it was not a quick peck on the cheek either. He swung his leg over his Firebolt and scooted up some. Daphne mounted the broom right behind him, putting her arms around Harry's waist and snuggling up to him.

"Ron, you and I will discuss your feelings for certain people on the train ride in September. I do hope you've grown up by then. Hermione?" He looked over at his long time friend. "About the question you asked me a couple of months back, about if something would ever happen?"

Hermione gave him a confused look until he quickly glanced at Ron with his eyes. Her face suddenly brightened and her eyes flickered over Ron too.

"Yeah, that," Harry confirmed. "I think I've changed my opinion, and I believe you should change your focus and search in another direction. I think your previous goal is beneath someone as wonderful as you."

The bushy-haired girl looked taken aback. "You do?"

"Yes, I do. I think you're too intelligent and it won't work out. It's your choice, of course, but I think you deserve a lot better," Harry confirmed. "Something for you to think about over the summer."

"What are you talking about?" Ron asked.

"A private opinion between Hermione and me. If she wants to explain it to you, that's up to her, but please don't ask her about it." Harry looked around at his friends with a smirk. "We'll see everyone later. I'll be in touch." Harry slowly flew over to the open window and out it, leaving gaping friends behind as they watched the couple fly off into the sunrise.

Epilogue

Harry thought about his summer as he sat in a lounge chair enjoying the sun on the beach of the French Riviera.

After breakfast in Glasgow, he and Daphne had Apparated to her parents' home. They had been very polite, although Harry could tell they were not happy with Daphne bringing him home. When the four had talked that evening, after her parents had been sworn to secrecy, Harry gave them the brief version of his adventures, including the fact that Voldemort was sleeping under a Draught of Living Death, while Harry took care of removing the unnamed magical artifacts that kept him from fully dying. Once they heard that, they were much friendlier with him.

Harry and Daphne also spent a day at Neville's and an afternoon at Hermione's, where he had sent Hedwig, since he would not really be

needing an owl on his trips. Once they all got to talking, both of Harry's friends warmed up to the Slytherin girl. Harry was especially pleased that Hermione approved of Daphne. As for his other best friend, he purposely avoided The Burrow for the summer to give Ron time to think.

After that, they had spent the next week retrieving all of the Horcruxes. Kreacher did indeed have the missing locket and Harry was able to get into Bella's vault with her key. With all the Horcruxes in hand, he went back to the cave and deposited them with the "dead" Voldemort. A simple cutting spell allowed him to remove the cursed broach of Gryffindor that Nagini had in her. He also made sure he was very familiar with the cave, especially the point where Bella had entered the water.

From there, they had traveled to almost every major European city, spending a couple of days at each one. Harry had transferred a significant amount of money from his Gringotts account into a Muggle bank, where he could get a credit card. They lived a life of semi-luxury and slept together, although they did avoid sex. Harry thought Daphne would have gone there if he had asked, but he did not want to do that until he was really sure about the girl, and in his mind, that meant an engagement ring at the least, and preferably a wedding ring.

They had had to return to England for a short time last week when Hedwig brought him a letter in Rome. Dumbledore had died the day before from the curse he had taken to his hand. Apparently the poison he had drunk had accelerated the curse. While they went to the funeral because he did respect the old wizard's abilities, he did not speak at the service when he was asked. He did not hate the old man, but Harry no longer held Dumbledore in the high regard he had in his first few years at school.

To Harry's amusement, Dumbledore had left him his large Pensieve, a number of memories in phials, and all of his notes on Tom Riddle, including many of his guesses on locations for Horcruxes. To Harry's surprise, two of them were correct. Perhaps it was unfair that Dumbledore had died without knowing that Riddle was taken care of, but Harry decided not to lose any sleep over it.

While they were there, McGonagall told him that she had become the new Headmaster and then she handed him the Head Boy badge. He had been floored, but took it. Having his own room seemed like a very good thing, considering how well he and Daphne were getting along. He was not surprised to learn that Hermione would be the Head Girl. He was glad the two girls got along, because Daphne would be spending a lot of time with him in the Head Suite rooms.

Harry also took the Sword of Gryffindor, promising to return it when school started. When McGonagall asked why, he told her, "I've found all of Voldemort's Horcruxes and I need the sword to dispose of them. I'll also use it to kill Voldemort in a week or two. You won't have to worry about any attacks from him next year." Her shocked expression was amusing to him. He was shocked when the old woman hugged him.

One other thing Harry did, while he was back in England, was to write thirty-three letters. They were very special in that they had three charms on them, all devilishly hard to cast and one of them took a lot of power.

The first charm was on the envelope and made it so only the intended recipient could open it, and anyone else who touched the envelop felt very compelled to give it to the recipient.

The second charm was on the letter and it was charmed to be a Portkey to the middle of a hidden underground lake.

The last charm was a magical signature suppressant charm, and hid the other two charms from detection. It only worked when the magic of the caster was stronger than the magic of the person doing the detection spell, but since Harry was probably the strongest magical person in England with "willpower" based spells, that was not much of a problem.

All the letters were dropped off at the Diagon Alley post office and the postage was paid for by a pretty blonde girl.

Three days later, the Daily Prophet reported that a number of very prominent men in the Wizarding World had disappeared the day

before. It was commented on that many of these men had been suspected of being Death Eaters in the first war with You-Know-Who, although they all had claimed being under the Imperious curse. The theory that all of the missing people were Death Eaters was considered by the Aurors and many others. One Senior Undersecretary, namely Delores Umbridge, also disappeared at the same time. Even those who favored the conspiracy theory said it was merely coincidence that Umbridge disappeared on the same day.

As Harry lay on the beach and contemplated his life now and possible future directions, he noticed and avidly watched a very shapely girl in a blue bikini walk towards him. The bikini matched her eyes perfectly. The Muggle outfit also reminded him of a few memories from when his Pureblood Wizarding Princess started to adjust to the Muggle world at the beginning of their summer journey. Some of those times had been absolutely hilarious. Fortunately, he had shared many ideas of how to live the Muggle way with her via Legilimency soon after her missteps, which really helped to speed up her adaptation.

"Hey beautiful," he called to her when she got near.

She leaned over and gave him a kiss. "You don't have to tell me that every day, but you don't have to stop either," she teased him.

"If it gets me kisses like that, I don't mind," he teased her back.

Daphne looked at him very intently for a few seconds before she sat on his lap, straddling him. Grabbing his head with both of her hands, she snogged him senseless over the next few minutes.

When he could think straight again, which was still difficult as she was still in his lap with her ample chest in front of his face, he asked, "What was that for?"

"For being you," she told him before she smiled very prettily at him, "and for ending the war, even if most people don't know that it's over yet. I also just received a letter from my parents saying they have stopped negotiations with the old geezer for my arranged marriage and that they would be delighted to discuss options with you, Harry."

"W-what? N-Negotiations with me?" he sputtered.

"Sure, Harry. They don't need protection from Voldemort anymore and so I can marry whomever I want to. Since I told them I love you, they assumed they needed to start negotiations with you," she told him sweetly and batted her eyes at him, still with a big smile on her face.

He gulped. "I really love you, Daph, but are we even old enough for that?"

"Legally, yes, since we're both seventeen, but we don't have to get married now, Harry. They just want to discuss the topic with you and work out an agreement. Like all parents, they want the best man for their daughter and that means you. It's a real bonus that I already love you." At his still shocked look, she added, "Get used to it Harry, it's the custom of Pureblooded Wizarding families. In fact, once you show the world that Voldemort is dead, you're going to have a lot of marriage proposals." An impish grin came over her now. "But you can avoid a lot of them if you make it known that you're already engaged."

Harry thought about that. She did make some sense about all the attention. He had destroyed the Horcruxes last week right after he got the Sword of Gryffindor. And he had planned to bring Voldemort's body out, stab it in the heart once, and then let the Ministry throw it through the Veil of Death in the Department of Mysteries when he returned next week. He knew he'd get a lot of attention from that, but marriage proposals?

She leaned down and deeply kissed him again. "Tell me how you really feel about me, Harry? Is it possible we could work out something permanent between us?" She had a hopeful look on her face.

He swallowed again, but thinking was very hard with this gorgeous girl in his lap, his hands on her bare sides, and "huge tracts of land" that were barely covered less than a foot away from his face. "Uh, why? I mean, why are you asking?"

"You mean besides the fact that I really do love you?" He nodded. "I'm just being my ambitious and cunning self, Harry. I also think that combining that with your brave and courageous self, plus the brains both of us have, we could make a great couple who could do almost anything. Don't you think so too?"

Closing his eyes, to block out the very tempting distractions, seemed to help him think better, so he kept them shut for a few minutes. Daphne did not talk to him and let him be, although she did play with his hair and caress his head. He decided he really liked that. "You make some excellent points," he finally admitted. He also had to admit that as far as he knew, she had never lied to him, and that was a big plus. She was also telling him up front exactly why she wanted him. He wondered how many girls would be that honest with him.

Again she leaned down and kissed him so thoroughly he did not care what else happened to him. "I really do love you, and I just want you to be happy, Harry. I think I can take care of you better than anyone else, but in the end, I just want you to be happy and to enjoy life with you. If it matters, I also think that you and I could make a few very nice looking children one day, too."

Harry opened his eyes. "That sounds really nice, Daph. So, whose side are you going to take while I'm negotiating? If I'm to take the first marriage proposal I get, I think I should get something really special."

Daphne smiled so large, Harry thought it might break her face. "You'll get me," she told him while she wiggled her eyebrows.

"You're someone. I'm talking about something, isn't that tradition?" he teased her.

She laughed. "Yes, that would be my dowry, and I think you'll be pleasantly surprised."

"I was joking," he told her, suddenly serious when he realized she might not be joking.

"I'm not. I do think you'll be happy with it; I'll make sure you are."

"I'd be happy with just you," he told her.

"Just as I'd be happy with only you, but it will be nice to have the other stuff. It makes life so much more comfortable," she chuckled.

Harry agreed, enjoying the sight of her chuckling, as he thought about how he had taken one third of the gold in Bella's vault. He had given the other two thirds to Neville. All in memory of Sirius, Frank, and Alice.

"Maybe we can stay with your family for the last week or so of summer and discuss it then," he suggested. "Having you with me when we show the world that I've vanquished Voldemort should help cement things too."

"Sounds good to me," she agreed and kissed him deeply again.

Harry held her tightly as they snogged on the beach. He decided that life with the Ice Queen was very good.

(The end)

((A/N: I hope everyone enjoyed this. It was a quick idea that I had some time ago and wanted to play with. I suppose I could have made it a lot longer, given it more intrigue and drawn things out, but I really didn't want to put that much effort into it or make it boring along the way.

I've received a number of reviews asking me to not to make Daphne into too much of a "Mary Sue". I will admit that I've made Daphne a "nice Slytherin", but she is no perfect little "goody-two-shoes" by any means. Go back and re-read the story and see what she does. Even the first scene in the story should show that she can be a not so nice person. She's willing to bend/ignore laws if she thinks she has a good enough reason to do so; she is a Slytherin for a reason. I think the epilogue should have made this even more clear. If you still think of Daphne as a "Mary Sue" here at the end of this story, then either we have different definitions of the term, or I've failed to communicate how I see Daphne. It would take a strong person to be married to Daphne and have the marriage be normal, or else she would end up

"wearing the pants in the family" (more so than Molly Weasley does). Fortunately, our hero is a strong-willed stubborn Gryffindor. :-)

To those who wonder about the Unbreakable Vow Snape made to Narcissa in book6, yes, I've ignored it. To be honest, I forgot about it. (Oh the shame. :-) But that's OK as the time frame had not ended when Snape went under the potion. My take is that if Harry decides to be merciful and let him be revived, then Snape would die the second that he awakened. Poor Snape... NOT! :-) Were I to show this universe 100 years beyond what's written, I strongly suspect that Snape would still be "sleeping" in the cave.

Keep the story alerts on as ch 5-? is in the works. I have other stories in the works that will pop out occasionally, like this one did. Until next time... -- Kevin))

The Grass Is Always Greener -- Extended Epilogue

Chapter 5

After leaving Hogwarts, Harry and Daphne had flown to Glasgow, disillusioned. Landing in an alley, they made themselves visible again, shrunk Harry's broom for storage, and had breakfast in a nice little café. With a discrete Muffling spell, they discussed their plans. Most of the discussion centered on Daphne's family and what she expected to happen when they showed up at her family's house. The biggest complication to the whole thing was that, while Daphne had managed to get her father to stall the talks for her betrothal to a man on the continent, the negotiations were only stalled and not cancelled. Another major difficulty was that Harry had not been raised in a Pureblood Wizarding home, but those traditions were how he was about to be judged. While she had been coaching him on that lifestyle over the last month or so, she detailed how she thought this meeting would go and how Harry should act. There were parts of it he was uncomfortable with, but there was little he could do about any of it.

The first part of acting like a Pureblood heir required them to head to Diagon Alley. They returned to the alleyway in Glasgow and Apparated to an alleyway in London just down the street from the Leaky Cauldron. The next few hours were spent in Madam Malkin's. While Daphne seemed to take delight in the process, Harry found it exasperating, but having fine robes to look his new role was a necessary part of the plan.

After buying the robes, they did a little general shopping, had lunch, and then he and Daphne had Apparated to her parents' home. It was a large manor house that was immaculate and embodied everything which a family of the Greengrass' status should have.

Approaching the front door, Daphne turned to Harry. "Whatever happens, Harry, remember that you are the heir of the Ancient and Noble Family of Potter. You must act like it, no matter how much you may dislike it, while you deal with my parents. Also remember that no matter what may be said or how I act, I love you and anything I do will be to bring us together." Harry nodded. She used the knocker on the front door, which was opened a moment later by a house elf.

“Mistress Daphne!”

“Good afternoon, Solly.” Daphne walked in with her hand on Harry’s arm. “Are my parents home?”

“Yes, Mistress. Master is in his study and Mistress is in her room.”

“Please tell them that I and a guest would like to meet them in the parlor. Tea for four would also be appropriate,” Daphne commanded, firmly but not unkindly.

“Yes, Mistress.” The elf left with a quiet pop.

“Let me give you a brief tour on the way to the parlor, Harry...”

It was a magnificent place, much like Malfoy Manor had been. Then again, Harry thought, they were peers, or had been. With all the Malfoys in Azkaban and their house half burnt down, the Malfoy family had lost most of their status. He mentally smiled at that thought.

Several minutes had been spent in the final hallway, with Daphne explaining who some of the people in the portraits were, and why they had been famous. It was her way of building up the family name, and Harry was suitably awed. In the parlor, they stood at the back windows and looked out over the back gardens. Besides the lush lawn, they did have a very nice flower area with a gazebo. While they were looking at that, the sound of a throat clearing caught their attention. Turning around, they found her parents standing in the doorway.

Mr Greengrass was an imposing dark-haired man, standing slightly taller than Harry and he was bigger too. He was stocky without being fat. His stare was quite imposing. Mrs Greengrass was an older version of Daphne, a woman who looked regal standing with a hand on her husband’s arm, much like Daphne had a hand on Harry’s arm. Her look was very neutral.

“Father, Mother,” Daphne addressed her parents. “I would like to introduce you to a very good friend of mine, Harry Potter, Head of the

Ancient and Noble Family of Potter. Harry, my parents, Hugo and Cassandra Greengrass.”

They both stood there, looking at the young couple for a very long moment. Harry knew he was being examined and measured. He really hoped he this worked out, as he did really like, even love, Daphne.

Finally, they walked over and her father slowly held out his hand, as custom required him to do. “Mr Potter, welcome to the Greengrass home,” he said slightly stiffly.

Harry responded as he had been directed, taking the man’s hand and saying, “Thank you, Mr Greengrass. I’m sure your hospitality will be unparalleled.”

An eyebrow briefly quirked up at the response. Daphne had explained that that reply indicated this was more than a social call.

“Mr Potter,” Cassandra Greengrass greeted him with a gracious smile and slight nod as she held out her hand.

Harry took the proffered hand and turned it slightly, briefly kissing her knuckles. “Mrs Greengrass, it is lovely to meet you. I can see where Daphne received her beauty.” While he meant it, it was the sort of thing he had been expected to say. The mother gave him another small nod for the compliment.

The required greetings over, Mr Greengrass took control of the conversation. “I do not have much free time at the moment, but I can make a few moments for my daughter and her guest.”

Hugo Greengrass had been polite, as had been required of him, but Harry could tell the man was not happy with him being here. Solly popped in at that moment with a tea set and served everyone. Harry was given a brief respite, as it was custom to pause while this happened, as if the house elf’s presence froze time.

When it was just the four of them again, Harry took a deep breath and hoped for the best. “Mr and Mrs Greengrass, I would like to take

some of your time and tell you about myself, as well as get to know you. I think that a friendship between our houses could be very beneficial to both of us. It might even lead to closer ties." The last part threw a gauntlet down in front of the man, probably confirming his worst fears, and Harry held his breath while he awaited the response.

Greengrass shifted ever so slightly. It gave him the appearance of again scrutinizing Harry, and this time, finding him wanting. If Daphne had not told him to expect this, he would have apologised for wasting the man's time and left. It was a test of sorts, she had explained. Harry held firm, using his Occlumency to keep a mental calm as he returned the man's gaze.

"I see," Greengrass finally drawled.

Harry would have been heartened at not being refused outright, but Daphne had told him that such an offer of friendship from a major family had to be taken seriously, even if it was not desired.

Greengrass pulled out a pocket watch and glance at it briefly before putting it back up. "I'm afraid I do not have the time at the moment to give this the attention it deserves."

The brush-off had been expected. "I understand this is somewhat sudden." Harry knew they knew of him, as Daphne had used his name in letters. "Perhaps we could continue this conversation over dinner?"

Mrs Greengrass watched the conversation with a slightly amused expression. Her husband did not appear to share her thoughts.

"That would be acceptable. Dinner is at seven," he said as he rose, causing Harry to rise as well. "Until then, Mr Potter." He nodded slightly and shook Harry's hand before he left.

"Please finish your tea, Mr Potter," Mrs Greengrass kindly told him.

"Thank you, ma'am." Harry knew he should not let his guard down. Daphne had said that her father ruled the house, but to never underestimate her mother. Considering what Daphne was like, and

he assumed much of her tutelage was from her mother, Harry took the advice seriously. He resumed his seat next to Daphne.

“Daphne has written that she’s been spending a lot of time with you, Mr Potter.” Piercing blue eyes caught his, measuring him in a different way.

“Yes, we’ve spent a good deal of time together this last term. I’m very pleased that circumstances have brought us together. I don’t believe we would have become the friends we are otherwise.”

“Why is that, Mr Potter?” Cassandra asked far more innocently than she probably was.

“I’m not sure what Hogwarts was like when you attended, but I consider the House System to be detrimental at the present time.” She quirked an eyebrow at him, so Harry continued. “As it stands now, it is very difficult to socialise with others outside of one’s own house. The houses divide us in way that I do not believe the founders ever intended. Until now, Daphne and I have kept our relationship private, but I would like to make it public when school starts next year.”

Cassandra put her empty cup down and looked at them a moment. “Daphne, dear -- do you desire to go forth with this relationship?”

With a smile that lit the room, Daphne replied, “Yes, Mother. I realise the alignment of the houses would be seen as unusual at first glance, but we are well matched.”

A gentle smirk appeared on the woman’s face. “Mr Potter, while I do think you are a better match for my Daphne, as you are more her age, you should be aware that Daphne is not free to choose all of her future.”

If Daphne had not explained this part of her world to him, he would be visibly angry. As it was, he was able to contain it and calmly reply, “I’m aware of your negotiations for a betrothal contract with another House, but Daphne has also told me they are not complete. I would

like for you and your husband to get to know me so I can show you that I would be a better choice for her and for your family.”

“You’re that confident?” There was a hint of surprise in the question.

“Yes ma’am. I think that after I tell you about myself and a few of the things I’ve done, that you will see that I am the better candidate,” he told her with far more confidence than he really felt.

“Then I look forward to that conversation, Mr Potter,” she told him with a smile. Turning to her daughter, she said, “Why don’t you take Mr Potter on a tour of the house? I believe that will easily take care of the rest of the afternoon, leaving time to freshen up before dinner.”

She gracefully stood, so Harry and Daphne joined her. “Thank you for your hospitality, Mrs Greengrass. I look forward to our time this evening,” Harry said.

“As do I, Mr Potter.” She turned and left the room, leaving the two teens alone.

Harry sagged and slowly sat back down. “Wow, that was draining,” he said in a muted voice while wiping his sweaty palms on the bottom part of his robes.

“You did very well, Harry,” Daphne told him before she gave him a kiss on the cheek. “But don’t let your guard down. Mother will be watching us for the rest of the afternoon, not every second, but often enough that you must be on your best behaviour.”

He nodded. “Right then, why don’t you give me the tour. It will help me keep my mind off of this evening.”

Daphne chuckled. “Just continue on as you have and you’ll do fine, Harry. Come on, let me show you around.”

They spent the rest of the afternoon walking around and talking, just enjoying the time together. In a few places, where Daphne had said she knew was private, they snogged a little; but Daphne was always

careful to make sure their appearance was perfect when they left said places.

As expected, dinner was very formal and the conversation was kept polite, covering a wide range of innocuous topics. Harry thought that Cassandra had given her husband an earful before dinner, as he was slightly more cordial to Harry. The after dinner conversation was moved back to the parlor and here was where Harry was going to have to prove himself. At his request that they keep the contents of this conversation to themselves, Hugo and Cassandra agreed, which Daphne had said was normal for House negotiations.

Harry then spent nearly an hour describing his life at Hogwarts, ignoring his life with the Dursleys. That pre-Hogwarts time would hurt his case. He also included the story about how he had saved Daphne from Malfoy, earning him a very grateful “thank you” from her father. His story ended with him saying that he had recently vanquished the Dark Lord and had him under control via a Draught of Living Death until Harry was ready to kill him and hand the body over to the Ministry for proof the war was really over.

To say that the elder Greengrasses were shocked would be an understatement.

Hugo Greengrass stared at him, his mouth moving for a few seconds without any sound coming out. He stopped, cleared his throat, and tried again. “Are you saying that you’ve defeated the Dark Lord?” he asked incredulously.

Harry wanted to say, ‘I thought I just said that,’ but he bit back that answer. “Yes sir, for all intents and purposes I have.”

“But then why not show the body?”

“Because, the Dark Lord,” Daphne had been clear not to use his moniker in front of her parents, “has performed a few rituals to prevent a simple death. I need to undo those before he can be really killed. I know how, I just need a week or so to do them, and well,” he smiled at the small joke, “I’ve been a little busy with school lately.”

Greengrass caught it as he wryly said, "Yes, I suppose you have been otherwise occupied." His wife shot him a small glare, but she was smiling at the teens.

"If you want me to be completely honest, I do have another reason to wait." They nodded at him to continue. "While fame has its uses, it's also a verifiable pain. So I thought I'd wait until the end of August to show the body."

"So you can hide at Hogwarts while everyone celebrates?" Cassandra asked with the corners of her mouth turning up just slightly.

Harry looked sheepishly at the floor. "Something like that. I'd just prefer to avoid all the interviews that I know will otherwise happen. I'm hoping I can avoid many of them and only do a few that way. I know that sort of thing will still happen after I finish Hogwarts, but I'm hoping the worst of the attention will be over by then."

"I see, and what about this summer?" the mother continued.

He wondered why she was asking, as her husband had done most of the talking earlier. "After I complete my quest, I plan to tour Europe. I've never gone on any holiday travels, and I'd like to do that while I'm still mostly unrecognizable." She glanced at Daphne who had been sitting quietly. Harry figured this was a good time to ask his question. "If I may, I'd like to ask if Daphne could accompany me on my journeys this summer. It would be good to have a travelling companion, and I'd like to have the time to get to know her better so we can finish answering the question of our intentions towards each other." There, he had all but asked the magic question, which he knew he was not formally allowed to do at this time, and he was quite sure he was not ready to ask for her hand in marriage.

Daphne's mother just smiled at him, but her father became visibly upset, until his wife put a hand on his arm and gave him 'a look' that mostly calmed him.

After a few very long seconds, Greengrass found his voice. "I'm sure you understand that is not a question we can answer at this time."

"I do sir, but I also hope that you can see that you no longer need the other alliance to be so close, and that a closer alliance with my house -- the house that defeated a major Dark Lord -- would be beneficial to your house. However, I do not feel that I can discuss this topic with you more at this time in good conscience, as you have the other negotiations in progress." Harry really hoped Daphne was right in telling him to do this. He was starting to think that just running off for the summer with a simple elopement one day might not be a bad idea.

"You say that you can not discuss this with us, and yet you want to take her way on a summer trip where who knows what might happen?" her father asked with some heat.

"I had hoped that you would see that I was the obvious choice for Daphne, and the trip would be one of two friends who needed some time to get to know one another better," Harry replied far more calmly than he felt.

Mr Greengrass looked only slightly mollified at that, but Mrs Greengrass looked at ease and put her hand on her husband's arm again. "Perhaps it would be best for us to take a few days to think about this and discuss it. Where are you staying Mr Potter?"

Harry looked a little embarrassed. "I don't turn seventeen until the end of July, about a month from now. The family manor is unavailable to me until then, which is another reason I planned to travel for a good part of the summer. Until then?" He paused and shrugged. "I'll probably just rent a room until I leave in a week or so."

Mrs Greengrass looked taken aback. "Nonsense! You shall stay here. It's the least we can do for a," she suddenly flashed him a large smile, "very good friend of Daphne's." Her husband did not seem to agree with her, based on his expression, but he did not disagree with her either. The hospitality "rules" prevented him for objecting without cause.

"Thank you very much. I truly appreciate your hospitality." And he did honestly feel that way. "I shall be gone most of the the next several

days, completing my quest, but perhaps we could continue to get to know one another better on the evenings you are available?"

"I believe that to be a splendid idea, Mr Potter. Don't you, Hugo?" Her look made it very clear only one answer was acceptable.

"Yes, splendid," Hugo begrudgingly agreed.

"Excellent. Daphne? Please show Mr Potter to the blue room on the first floor." Cassandra stood and everyone followed her example. "Have a good evening and I will see you at breakfast in the morning." She grabbed her husband's arm and they walked out.

Daphne grinned at Harry. "See, that wasn't so bad, was it?" Harry rolled his eyes and she laughed heartily. "Come on, let me show you to your room. The family rooms are one floor above yours."

She showed him to a very nice room done in dark blue. It was the size of the entire ground floor of the Dursleys. The bathroom was quite luxurious and done in black granite. In the bathroom, Daphne pushed him up against the wall and proceeded to snog him thoroughly. Harry was a little put out when she suddenly stopped, but he did realise they could not do that all night.

With a smirk, she told him, "Breakfast is at half eight. Good-night, Harry."

He shook his head. She was a handful, but he loved every second of it.

The next morning, Harry went down to the dining room and found Daphne and her mother. Mr Greengrass had already left he was told. After a nice meal, he was ready to work on his quest. Part of him wanted to relax and take a few days off, but the other part of him just wanted it all over with. Also, he did not want Daphne's parents to think of him as a lazy bum, like the Dursleys had always accused his father of being.

There were three Horcruxes left. In theory, he would have to break into Hogwarts to get one of them. He really should have retrieved it

before the end of last term, but he had not planned that much. Harry was so relieved to have vanquished Voldemort that he had mentally put off finding all the Horcruxes until the summer. Still, there might be a way to get it without going there, and he needed to visit the other place anyway.

Harry thanked Mrs Greengrass for breakfast, kissed Daphne on the cheek, and told her that he would be back before lunch. When she said she wanted to go with him, he explained that his first stop was hidden and she would not be able to enter since she did not know the secret, but that she could accompany him for the afternoon in Diagon Alley. She looked a little put out, but did not complain. Harry had a suspicion that her mother's presence restrained Daphne.

Going upstairs, Harry grabbed his backpack that he normally carried his books in at school, emptied it out so he could carry things in it, and then left the manor via the Floo. He was surprised at how empty Sirius's old house felt as he stepped into it for the first time in almost a year. It was dead quiet.

"Kreacher!" Harry called out.

A moment later, the old house elf popped in. "Filthy Half-blood Master call for Kreacher?" he snarled.

Harry considered that perhaps part of the problem was that they did not treat Kreacher like he expected, so he did not respect them. Although, Harry also agreed with those who said Kreacher had not been treated well. He hoped to find a middle ground. "Kreacher, as your master I order you to stop insulting me."

"Yes -- Master."

Harry could tell that Kreacher did not want to obey, but his magic forced him to. "I am the head of the Ancient and Noble House of Black as well as the Ancient and Noble House of Potter. I am the head of two Pureblood Houses and you will treat me as such." He made sure he was firm and had an even in tone.

"Yes, Master." The reply was a little more respectful.

Harry decided to appeal to old loyalties. "Kreacher, I believe that Master Regulus was trying to do something special when he died. Is that true?" The elf looked up incredulously at Harry, who took that for a yes. "And did Master Regulus ask you to help him destroy a golden locket?" The elf slowly nodded. "Then it is time to fulfill Master Regulus's last command, Kreacher. With your help, I shall destroy the locket."

Extreme happiness filled the elf for about two seconds, then all joy left him and he started to beat his head against the nearest wall.

"Kreacher! I order you to stop punishing yourself." The elf hit his head one last time and then stopped. Harry asked, "What is wrong?"

"Nasty, filthy, thief Fletcher stole locket. Kreacher knows he did. He was the only one in the house while Kreacher was out getting food," the elf spat.

Harry sighed. So close, he thought. "That is most unfortunate, but we will deal with that in a moment. I have an easy task for you first. Kreacher, do you know of a place called the Room of Requirement at Hogwarts?" The elf nodded. "I want you to go there. Think about a place to hide things, and in that configuration, the room will have lots of junk in it."

"I know of it, Master. Elves use the room to store things students have lost."

That surprised Harry, and it also encouraged him, as this might be easier than he thought. "I want you to go to that room and in it is a bust with a headdress containing a blue jewel on it. The bust is sitting on a small table in front of a wardrobe. I want you go find that and bring it too me now."

"Yes Master." Kreacher popped out.

Harry sat down and waited, there was not much else to do. Maybe three minutes later, Kreacher returned with a pop, holding a bust with the headdress on it. It was the one he had seen before. Pulling the

headdress off the bust, he felt its evilness the moment he touched it. Quickly, he put it into his backpack, glad to cease his contact with it.

"You have done well, Kreacher." For the first time ever, Harry saw Kreacher stand tall, at least for a house elf, and look proud. "For your next task, we will try to fulfill Master Regulus's desire. You are to track down the thief, and if he has the locket, take it from him and bring it to me."

An almost evil grin came over the elf. "Yes, Master," he said with delight.

"If he does not have the locket any more, you are to find out what he did with it, who he sold it to, and search that person's home, or perhaps their office. If you find it, take it and return to me. If they don't have it, continue your search until you do find it. You are not allowed to kill anyone, do you understand?" Harry said sternly. If Fletcher got a little roughed up by the elf, Harry was prepared not to care. Fletcher should not have taken anything from the house.

"Yes, Master." The reply had been only a little disappointed, but the fact that there was any disturbed Harry. "Master? This task may take some time."

"I understand, Kreacher. I know I can't force you to do the impossible, but I would dearly like this task done before the middle of August, sooner if possible," Harry instructed him.

"Yes, Master. I will try very hard to be done by then."

"Is anyone living here besides you?" Harry was curious if maybe Lupin was.

"No, Master. Just Kreacher. No one has been here for over three weeks."

"Very well. Take time to eat and sleep, but finding the locket and bringing it to me is your highest priority," Harry commanded.

"Yes, Master." The elf recognised that he had been dismissed and left with a pop.

Harry wondered how long it would take him to find and retrieve the locket. Harry chuckled as he headed for the Floo. He would hate to be Fletcher about now. Grabbing some Floo powder from the mantle, Harry returned to Greengrass Manor.

After a pleasant lunch with just his girlfriend, her mother had gone somewhere unnamed, the two teens used the Floo to get to Diagon Alley. Harry directed them towards Gringotts. They walked together, but did not hold hands, not wanting to make a statement just yet. In the bank, Harry asked for the Head Teller and was directed to Ripfang.

"Ripfang, I'm Harry Potter and my friend is Daphne Greengrass." He hoped being polite would help him. "As head of the House of Black, I need to access the vault of a member of my house who has recently died. I have her key."

The goblin stared at him for a moment before stretching out his gnarled hand. "Key please."

Harry gave it to him.

Ripfang held it for a moment, rubbing his fingertips over it. "Vault #157, owner Bellatrix Black. I will check our records." He kept the key and turned around. Pulling a huge dusty book off the shelf, he dropped it with a bang on his desk. The goblin opened the book and began searching. A few minutes later, he looked up. "Yes, she died less than month ago with no direct heir, so notices have not gone out for final distribution of her vault. So you wish to claim it on the basis of being her Head of House?"

"Yes, Ripfang. I believe she opened the vault before she was married, and was therefore a Black at the time. Also, her husband was recently put to death and they have no children to inherit." Harry had been thrilled when he read that both Lestrange brothers had been

kissed by Dementors after their recapture. At least Scrimgeor's administration was doing something right.

"All seems in order then. You will have to sign a few forms first." The goblin put the book away and pulled out two forms. The first stated why he was receiving ownership of the vault. He signed it. The second form explained the mechanics, including a twenty percent fee on the value of the contents.

"Twenty percent?" Harry exclaimed when he had finished reading the form. Daphne frowned and looked down at the form.

"It is the standard amount. There is much work to be done to reclaim a vault," Ripfang told him with a slight snarl for being questioned.

"For the money, the value is obvious, but how do you value the non-monetary items?" Daphne asked.

The goblin looked at Harry but answered the question. "We use standard appraisal techniques."

"That will acceptable on the few things I keep, but I would prefer to sell the rest and use the actual value," Harry countered.

"Fine, but the seller's fee is another five percent."

Harry felt Daphne tap his leg twice. "Considering you're already taking twenty percent anyway, I think two percent is more than enough." He was not sure this was negotiable, so he hoped he had interpreted Daphne's signal correctly.

"Three percent, and not a Knut less," Ripfang ground out.

"Very well, three percent," Harry agreed. "Please write that into the form before I sign it." The goblin did so and Harry signed. "Shall we go see what's in there?"

Ripfang grunted, but got up. He called another goblin over to him and the four of them went to the vaults. After a ride that both teens

enjoyed, they got out at vault #157. Ripfang used the key Harry had given him to open the vault.

There was a respectable mound of gold, maybe a third the size of the mound in Harry's trust vault. There were also a number of piles of objects and multiple shelves on the wall. Harry groaned. "This is going to take awhile. Daphne, please look around and see if there is anything of interest. I must find a small cup here."

The teens started searching while the goblins started making an inventory of the items. Daphne barely stayed ahead of the goblins, seeing everything before they took hold of it.

Nearly ten minutes later, Harry exclaimed, "I found it." Going over to a shelf in the back, he reached up to an upper shelf and pulled a small cup down with a badger on it. The evilness contained in the cup oozed out over his fingers like a cold vapor.

Ripfang came over and his eyes widened. "Do you realise what you hold?"

"I do," Harry calmly said, "but it is worthless and of no value."

Ripfang stared at him. "You are insane, Wizard. That relic is worth much."

Harry held it out to him. "Then I invite you to pour liquid into it and drink. I will honour you at your funeral." Over the goblin's shoulder, he saw Daphne smirk, obviously holding in laughter. Harry put the cup down on the nearest shelf, not wanting to feel the evilness anymore. He watched Ripfang wave his hands over the cup and then turn to the other goblin and shouted in Gobbledygook.

As the other goblin left, Harry asked, "Where is he going?"

"To get a curse breaker." Ripfang studied Harry for a moment. "You knew this cup was cursed, didn't you?"

Harry saw no reason to lie. "I would have been surprised if it hadn't been."

Ripfang shook his head and returned to doing an inventory. A short while later, the cart returned and the assistant goblin and yet another goblin entered the vault. Harry was not surprised to see a goblin instead of Bill Weasley, figuring that the goblins trusted their own more in cases like this.

The curse breaker and Ripfang had a short conversation before the curse breaker started doing Goblin magic over the cup on the shelf. Over ten long minutes later, the curse breaker stopped working and said something to Ripfang, who did not look happy.

“What did he say?” Harry inquired politely.

“He said that it would cost more to remove the curses than the cup was worth,” Ripfang ground out.

Harry smiled. “So, shall we say that’s its worth is, oh, one Galleon?” Harry opened his bag and dropped the cup in, knowing it would not break.

“Fine, it is worth one Galleon. I believe your friend has looked at the other objects, do you want any of those as well?” Ripfang asked.

Daphne pointed to a stack of a half dozen books and said, “I think you should take the books, Harry. Everything else is either family related or pretty standard. As you didn’t grow up in the family, I doubt they would have any sentimental value to you.”

“You’re right,” he said thoughtfully, “but I know someone who might want them.” Turning to Ripfang, he said, “Do you know the value of the money?”

“Twenty-two thousand seven hundred sixty-four Galleons, seven Sickles, and four Knuts,” Ripfang said without hesitation.

Harry considered that for a moment. “Please move that into my trust vault, minus your twenty percent. I’ll take the books with me. Leave the objects here for now. Andromeda Tonks will be by to see you today or tomorrow. Please bring her here and let her take anything

she wants. You can remove the appraisal value from the final sale total after you sell whatever she doesn't want."

Ripfang nodded and they all moved towards the cart. Harry dropped the books into his bag too and they left. He would Floo Call Andromeda from the Greengrasses and explain it all to her, and send her to Ripfang. Perhaps there would be something here she'd like. He had an idea for the money.

Walking out into Diagon Alley, Harry had another idea as they passed a shop. With a grin, he told Daphne, "Come this way," as he headed for the shop's door.

"Why?" she asked.

"For your dad. You'll see."

She was still perplexed when they exited the shop fifteen minutes later with a Wizarding camera that produced instant photos. She was even more perplexed at his next request.

At the Apparation point, he told her very quietly, "Hold onto my arm tightly and will yourself to follow me. I'll Side-Along Apparate you to our next destination."

A glimpse of terror crossed her face. "Are you daft? You'll get us splinched and you don't even have a licence yet," she hissed at him, trying to keep the conversation private.

"Relax," he whispered back. "I did this with Dumbledore and three other times as well."

She seemed to understand what he was going to do, but she still looked uneasy. "Please be careful, Harry."

"Always," he told her with a grin. Carefully picturing the destination and both of them going there, Harry Apparated with a larger than normal crack. Seconds later, they were on the coast and in front of a little cave. He took her hand and led her into the cave. With a minor cutting spell, he sliced his finger, drawing a little blood.

"What are you doing?" she asked, curiosity getting the better of her.

"Opening a doorway. It's one of the protections." He smeared the blood at the right spot on the wall and watched the door open.

"Well, is it going to open?" she asked.

"Hold my hand, Daph." When she had gripped it, he walked them both through the opening in the wall that only he could see. She gasped as they entered a large underground cavern. "This way," he told her and started walking around the lake.

"It's fortunate," he started explaining, "that I'm still not seventeen, or this would not work out as nicely."

"Why's that?"

"Because the boat only holds one adult, but since I'm not magically an adult yet, both of us can go." She raised her eyebrows at him as if he had to be joking. "Nope, I'm serious. This is how I got across with Dumbledore, who told me of the magic on the boat. In fact," he paused and thought for a moment. "I better move the bodies to this side or I may not be able to retrieve them later."

"I don't understand," she said.

"Well, right now, I can go get Voldemort's body and bring it back in the boat, with him being the adult and me not. But if I wait until after my birthday, I won't be able to bring him back across, at least not with the boat. I wonder if I could bring another boat in? Naw, too risky, I'll just move them now."

Harry stopped walking and picked up a chain. A moment later there was a very small boat in front of them. "Stay on the shore and whatever you do, do not touch the water. If you have to flee, smear some blood on the door we came through and it will let you back out, but as long as you just stand here, you should be safe."

"Should be?" She did not seem happy about that.

He grinned at her less than pleased expression. "Not my magic, but yeah. I'll be back in a few minutes." He stepped into the boat and it started moving on its own. A few minutes later, he was back and had Snape stiffly balanced on the two sides. Harry wondered if Snape looked slightly different, but shrugged it off, sure it was just his imagination.

"Daph, would you levitate him over to the shore?" he asked her. She shrugged and did what she was told, doing her best not to look at the pasty complexion of her former Potions teacher in just a pair of boxers, his Dark Mark clearly visible on his left arm.

Harry left and again returned in a few minutes with another body, although this one had a dead snake tied to it. She levitated it off the boat and Harry exited as well. The two bodies were put at the side of the cave next to the rock wall.

Searching the snake, Harry soon exclaimed, "Ah, ha!" and used a cutting curse on the snake near a bulge in the skin. A moment later he pulled out a small broach from the snake body. "Yuck!" The expression on Daphne's face indicated that she agreed with him. He set the brooch down, then pulled out the two Horcruxes from his backpack and added them to the pile.

"Oh! I almost forgot. Stand over there," he directed her as he pulled out the camera, "next to Voldemort. This should be good enough proof for your father."

"You mean to believe that you've done what you've said?" she asked.
"That's very good thinking, Harry. I'm impressed."

"Hey, I get good ideas occasionally. Smile and say cheese..." He snapped a couple of photos. When they saw that those came out well, he had Daphne take a couple with him standing next to Voldemort, and one with him with one foot on Voldemort's chest, as if he'd just conquerored him.

"That is cheesy," Daphne told him as they looked at the picture.

"Yeah, but I bet I get a lot for it from the Daily Prophet," he said with a smile.

"What?" she asked incredulously. "I thought you didn't want the publicity."

"I don't, but you know they're going to ask for a photo like this. Now, I don't have to do it, I can just hand them this one, and I get the photographer fees too."

"You mean that I get the photographer fees." Her eyes narrowed slightly.

"Uh, yeah," he answered a little nervously now, "that's what I mean, you get the fees."

Her face lit up after winning the battle and she kissed him on the cheek. "Good move, Harry. I see you're learning."

He restrained himself from rolling his eyes at her. "Fine, let's get back to your place. We can Apparate once we're back outside." Harry used his previous cut to get them out. After healing it, they both returned to Greengrass Manor.

Dinner that evening was still a little stiff. Daphne's father still was not his friendliest. Her mother was very charming however. As dinner ended, Harry made a suggestion.

"If you have a few minutes, I have something to show you," Harry told them. The parents looked at each other and then led the teens into the parlor.

Harry pulled out the photos and handed them to Daphne's father. "I think this will prove my claim," Harry told him proudly.

Hugo Greengrass was shocked as he looked at the photos with Harry and the Dark Lord, who was clearly unconscious. The photos of his daughter standing over the Dark Lord were even more shocking to

him. That the photos showed her wearing the robes she had on at this moment convinced him. He was very pale when he looked up.

"I said that I had a few things to do to end my quest before I killed him," Harry explained. "I did two of those today, and I also moved the comatose Dark Lord for easier access later. I thought you'd appreciate seeing these, that way you'd know I was serious."

"You really did conquer him..." Greengrass finally got out as his wife took the photos from him, and giving a gasp as she saw them.

"I did. So would you say that I'm powerful enough for your daughter?" He wanted to boast, but used his Occlumency to maintain his calm manner. Daphne had told him that would win more points with her father.

Both parents mutely nodded.

"As I mentioned yesterday, you can't tell anyone of this now." He walked over and retrieved the photos from Mrs Greengrass. "I've sent my house elf on an errand and I have one other thing to do before this can be announced, and an early announcement might cause me problems. I hope you understand."

"You have a house elf?" Greengrass asked him.

"Yes, sir. I'm also the Head of the House of Black, and I inherited a house elf from that family," Harry explained. "Daphne didn't tell you?"

"No," Cassandra said as she glared at her daughter, "she left out the detail about you being head of the House of Black too."

"Sorry, Mother," Daphne said contritely. "I thought I had mentioned it in one of my letters."

After a long moment of staring at him, Hugo Greengrass started to smile and then to laugh -- loudly. His wife was smiling was well. "Well done, boy, very well played."

His use of the term “boy” did not bother Harry as it did when Vernon Dursley used it. “Thank you, sir,” he said with a bow of his head.

“I believe we can come to terms, don’t you dear?” Hugo asked.

“Yes, dear,” his wife told him with a thoughtful look.

With a considerably more friendly air, Hugo Greengrass walked over to Harry. “Mr Potter? I believe we can work something out shortly. I just need a little time to close some business first. What do you say?” He stuck out his hand.

Harry slowly smiled and reached out, taking the man’s hand and shaking it. “It would be my pleasure to discuss this with you in say, late August?”

“Just before you make your big announcement?” Hugo prompted.

“Your daughter suggested the same thing, saying it would save me a lot of trouble, sort of making two announcements at once, assuming everything works out right.” Harry looked over and saw a beaming Daphne.

“My daughter is very smart,” the father said proudly.

“Yes she is,” Harry agreed, “she certainly is.” Harry was also very pleased to have reached a tentative agreement.

“Daphne?” Her father looked at her sternly. “You will not get yourself into trouble when you’re travelling with Mr Potter. Is that understood?”

“Yes, Father.” The reply may have been said meekly, but the smile on her face told the real story -- she was very happy.

“I think this calls for a toast. Do you drink brandy, Mr Potter?” The look Greengrass gave him said only one answer was acceptable.

“Sounds wonderful,” Harry said, hoping it was. While the drink was strong, Harry was fine as long as he sipped. They sipped late into the night as they got to know one another better.

Harry woke late the next morning with a killer headache. He laid in bed wondering how he was going to get up when Daphne came in carrying a small goblet.

"Drink this, Harry," she ordered him. "You'll feel a lot better."

He silently complied, almost gagging on the stuff, but his head started to feel better immediately.

"It was really unfair of Father to do that to you, but I hope you'll excuse him. He just got a little carried away in his exuberance."

"A little?" he asked softly, still not liking loud noises, even if the headache was gone.

"He didn't really like marrying me off to the man on the continent either, so when he saw that you really were a viable candidate, well, he got a little excited," she explained as if it should have been obvious.

"That's like saying Hagrid finds dragons only a little dangerous," he retorted.

She laughed loudly. "Oh, sorry," she told him when he cringed. "But your analogy is apt. So, once you get out of bed, what are we going to do today?"

Harry rolled to his back, hoping that would help a little. "I thought we might go see Hermione today, or at least for the afternoon."

"Do you think she'll really accept me?" Daphne asked with a little worry.

"Based on what happened at the end of the year, yeah, I don't think she'll be a problem. Say, would you help me up, slowly." Daphne grabbed his hand and pulled slowly. "Bloody hell that hurts."

"Be glad you got the hangover potion or it'd be ten times worse," she said with a chuckle.

Harry groaned. "Help me to stand so I can go take a shower. I'll be down for some toast and tea when I can." Daphne laughed quietly and helped propel him into the bathroom.

Harry was feeling mostly normal after a light breakfast. Going up to his room, he dug through his old notebooks from school. He was sure he had Hermione's telephone number in one of them. It took him twenty minutes, but he did find it. Making sure his hair was covering his scar, he and Daphne used the Floo to get to the Leaky Cauldron, where they went out into the Muggle world. It did not take long to find a pay phone.

"Grangers," a very familiar voice answered the phone.

"Hi, Hermione, this is..."

"Harry! There you are! Are you all right? Where are you? Did you know everyone's been looking for you? Are you..."

"Hermione!" Harry's shout stopped the girl's questions for the moment. "If you'll give me your address, we'll come by and see you and I'll try to answer your questions." Daphne was giving him a strange look, so he put his hand over the mouthpiece. "She's just being her usual self and asking a million questions." Daphne chuckled.

Hermione quickly gave him her address. "I better tell Professor Lupin too; he's been the most worried."

"No," Harry quickly interjected to derail that idea. "We're coming over to talk to you, not to have a meeting where I have to confront everyone about my right to have a life. Promise me you won't tell anyone or I won't come over," he told her seriously.

"But Harry..."

"No, Hermione. You have to choose. Either my friendship comes first or it doesn't, just like in the summer before our fifth year when you were told not to write me."

"You mean when we were told not to write you with any war information," she corrected him.

"Whatever. You chose to follow a useless order instead of being my friend. I didn't confront you with it then, but I am now. Who's more important, me or some group that doesn't really tell you anything?"

"That's so unfair," she told him.

"So is life. Welcome to my world." He was not going to budge an inch.

"You're not the only one who has difficulties in life, Harry."

"And you're avoiding the question, Hermione. I wanted to spend some time with my friend. So do we come over or not?"

Hermione huffed. "Fine, I won't tell anyone, but I do this under protest."

Harry laughed. "You can tell me about it when we get there. I'll get us a taxi now."

"Since you keep saying 'we', I assume Daphne is coming over too?"

"Yeah. We'll see you soon." He hung up.

"That was a lot of work to get an address," Daphne commented with a wry grin.

"Yeah, but that's Hermione sometimes," he explained. "I have some money, so let's get us a taxi."

A half an hour and eighty quid later, the two teens were in a nice neighbourhood in front a nice looking two-story house. It was clear to Harry that the Grangers made enough money to be very comfortable.

Harry had barely rung the doorbell, when the door was yanked open and he was engulfed in a hug.

"Harry, I'm so glad to see that you're all right," Hermione told his shoulder.

"Hermione, it's good to see you too, but we just saw each other, what, three days ago?" He looked at Daphne over Hermione's shoulder and saw her smiling.

The girl let Harry go, but did not step too far away. "I know, Harry, but I was still very worried about you since you did not leave school the normal way or go to your relatives' house."

Harry waved that off. "So, I knew what I was doing. Anyway, perhaps we should go in?"

"Right, come in." She turned to the other guest. "Hi, Daphne. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to ignore you."

Daphne just smiled at her. "It's all right, Hermione, at least as long as I could watch. Otherwise, I would have thought you were trying to steal him from me."

Hermione blushed. "No, I do love Harry, but not in that way."

"She's really more like a sister to me," Harry said pointing at his long time friend.

"Exactly, you're more like a brother to me," Hermione agreed as she led them into the living room. Harry and Daphne took a couch while Hermione took a chair.

"So, have you finished your summer homework yet, Hermione?" Harry asked, doing his best to hide a smile.

"No, but I've started. Can you say the same?" She let some of the tease show and all three chuckled. "Really, how have you been and where have you been, Harry?"

"Quite reasonable. I had a bit of a rough start with Daphne's father, but once I showed him I was someone to be taken seriously, I'd say we gotten along rather well." He turned to his girlfriend. "What do you think?"

"I would agree. Like I told you earlier, Mother liked you from the beginning, but Father, well, you really do have to prove yourself to him. I'd swear that he thinks that anyone younger than him can't know what they're doing," Daphne said with a little shake of her head.

"So you're staying with the Greengrasses?"

"Yes, Hermione, but you can't tell anyone, at least not for a week or so," Harry confided.

"Why then?" Hermione's curiosity never stopped.

"Because we're leaving on our trip then, and I don't expect anyone to be able to track us once we start to travel." He decided to change topics. "Tell me, how did your talk with Neville and Ginny on the train go? Did they understand?"

"Yeah, they took it pretty well. Ginny had more questions about why you had to do all of this. I didn't tell her any more of the prophecy than you told them, so you should expect her to talk to you about it all. Neville took it pretty well, especially after it hit him that the prophecy could have been about him." Hermione's eyes danced with laughter. "You should have seen his face when he realised that, and how relieved he was when he realised it wasn't him."

"I can imagine," Harry said with a smile. "I was very pissed when Dumbledore told me the prophecy." Hermione scowled at him, but he did not stop. "I was even more pissed when I realised that he had waited so long to tell me."

Hermione studied him for a long moment. "You're not as fond of him anymore, are you?"

Harry noted that she looked a little sad when she asked that. "No, I'm not. You have to understand, Hermione, that I've never had any good

authority figures in my life, so Dumbledore failing is just one more for the list. I, uh, I really looked up to him when we started school, but over time, well, I've seen just how many times he's failed me. To make it worse, most of his failures have been large ones, or so they seem to me." Now Harry was feeling a little sad.

"That's because you haven't been around the Wizarding world long enough, Harry," Daphne told him. "Magic has a way of magnifying everything. Our heroes," she pointed to him, "are larger than life, and our villains are overwhelming. Magic does not give us a wonderful fantasy world. Just wait until you see the details of our politics." She shook her head as if mourning a travesty.

"That's an interesting way of putting it," Hermione said thoughtfully.

"It comes from growing up in a Wizarding home. In many ways I pity you Muggle-born. You're at such a disadvantage in the Wizarding world," Daphne explained.

"I've read that over half of the Muggle-borns return to the Muggle world, or else their participation in the Wizarding world is very marginal," Hermione half said half asked.

"I would believe it," Daphne confirmed. "What are you going to do after you finish Hogwarts?"

To Harry's surprise, Hermione did not have a ready answer. "I suppose I'd like to either work in a research company, creating new spells or other new things, or else I'd like to work in the Ministry to try to fix some of the injustices I see."

"You'll have a hard path either way," Daphne told her, "but I think you can do it if anyone can."

"Thanks." Hermione's smile covered her face. "I've also considered going to a Muggle university, if I can pass the entrance tests."

"Say, Hermione, is Hedwig here?" Harry asked. "I need to send a letter out."

"Sure, she's up in my room. Go on up the stairs over there. My room is on the right. You'll find quills and parchment on my desk too."

"Thanks!" he told her and got up.

Upstairs, it was easy to tell which room was Hermione's. Harry was not sure he had ever seen such a feminine side to his friend. He did find Hedwig in her room. Although she was asleep, Harry walked over lightly stroked the side of her neck. Hedwig's head snapped up immediately and she hooted at him.

"Hello, girl. I hope you're doing all right here." The owl hooted as if saying yes. "I need to send a letter out. Can you take it to Neville Longbottom and wait for a reply?" Hedwig hooted more emphatically. "You're such a good girl. I won't be here, but I'm sure you'll be able to find me." He stroked her again before he wrote a quick note about seeing Neville in the next day or two. When he was done, he gave it to his familiar and she took off.

Harry wrote one more to Lupin, telling him that he was fine and would be gone for the summer, and that he hoped Lupin had a good summer too. Harry knew that might not be totally fair to the old family friend, but then again, he had never asked them to watch his house or anything else they did for him. Not that he was not grateful for their help, but he did not feel that he answered to any of the Order, at least now that Sirius was gone.

He went back downstairs and saw the two girls with their heads very close together. When they heard him and looked up, they started to giggle. Harry rolled his eyes and shook his head. There were talking about him and that was probably not good for him. On the other hand, it looked like they were getting along well, and that was good. He wanted to keep Hermione's friendship and he planned for Daphne to be around a lot of the time, so it was useful they were getting along.

Harry rejoined them, gave Lupin's letter to Hermione to mail when Hedwig came back, and then the three of them had a very enjoyable afternoon together talking.

At breakfast the next morning, Hedwig flew into the house and landed on Harry's shoulder and rubbed her head against the side of his head.

"Hey girl, it's good to see you too. I knew you could find me." It was then that Harry noticed that all three of the Greengrasses were looking at him. "What?"

"Is that Hedwig, your owl?" Daphne asked.

"Oh right, sorry. Everyone, this is Hedwig, my friend who has been with me through thick and thin. Hedwig, please meet Mr and Mrs Greengrass, as well as Daphne, who you will get to see a lot more of." The owl gave three hoots.

"So, did your flight go well?" Harry asked as he took the note from her leg.

Hedwig hooted once and then gave a short barking hoot.

"Hey, I'm not trying to be insulting and saying that you couldn't do it, I was just asking to be nice."

Hedwig gave a soft coo.

"Apology accepted. Let's see." He gave his owl a piece of bacon before quickly reading the note. "Good news, Neville will be home today, so we can go visit him." He looked up at Daphne when she did not say anything, and saw her with a puzzled expression. "What?" he asked again.

"Do you always talk with your owl like that?" she asked.

"Sure. I think she really understands me. If she doesn't understand the words, she at least understands my intent." Hedwig gave a short barking hoot and stared at him. "OK, I guess she does understand the words."

"I've never seen an owl like that," Mrs Greengrass told him.

Harry shrugged. "I guess Hedwig is different, just like me." Hedwig gave a soft hoot of agreement. "If you're all finished Daphne, we can go see Neville. He said he'd be at home all day."

"Yeah, sure, I need a minute or two to finish getting ready," Daphne said a little distractedly as she got up, still looking at Hedwig.

"No problem, I need to get something from my room too. I'll meet you at the fireplace." He turned to his hostess. "Thank you for breakfast, ma'am; it was as good as usual."

A few minutes later, the two teens were going through the Floo Network to Longbottom Manor. When they came out, a house-elf greeted them and directed them to a couch before he popped away. A minute later, Neville and his grandmother came in.

"Harry," Neville called out and came over to shake Harry's hand. "Gran, I'm sure you remember Harry Potter."

"Yes, how do you do, Mr Potter?" the older woman asked very formally.

"Very well, thank you." Harry took her hand and kissed the back of it, using the formal greeting.

"And this is his girlfriend, Daphne Greengrass," Neville introduced the blonde.

Augusta Longbottom held out her hand and Daphne gave her a polite shake. "You must be Hugo and Cassandra's youngest."

"Yes ma'am, and it's nice to meet you," Daphne replied.

"You're the image of your mother, whom I have not seen much of lately. Is she well?" Augusta inquired.

"Yes ma'am. I understand she's been busy with family matters lately," Daphne explained vaguely.

"Of course, what with your older sister getting married in the last year and a great-uncle dying a month or so ago."

Harry was amazed the older woman knew so much, considering the Greengrasses were consider a neutral family at best and a Dark family by some. Perhaps in some social circles, "alignment" did not matter as much. He would have to ask Daphne about it later.

The matriarch looked at the three youngsters. "I shall let you enjoy yourselves. Lunch is at noon in the dining room."

Before she could go, Harry spoke quickly. "Madam Longbottom, I have something I brought for Neville and you probably should be here for it too."

Augusta crooked a bushy eyebrow before she waved them to seats. Neville looked very puzzled, which Harry could understand as Harry had not mentioned any presents before.

Once Neville was sitting, Harry pulled a wand and an envelope out of his robes and walked over and gave them to Neville, before he took his seat.

"I don't understand, Harry. Why would you give me a wand?" Neville continued to have a puzzled look.

"If I may tell you a brief story?" Harry got a nod. "Madam Longbottom, I need to ask that you not tell anyone this until the end of the summer." She acknowledged the request with a nod. "As you know, Neville, I recently fought Voldemort." Augusta gave a slight gasp, but Harry only gave her a smile and continued on.

"As I was leaving his hide-out, I chanced upon Bellatrix Lestrange." Neville went pale and Augusta became very still. "I managed to stun her and took her with me. I'm not overly proud of what I did, but knowing I could not hold her anywhere, I allowed her to die. That is her wand, which I give to you as a trophy. I, uh, I thought you might like to have it. I'm sorry for depriving you of the chance to go after her, but when I saw that I had an opportunity to defeat her, I took it."

Tears were starting to run down Neville's face, but he did not wipe them away. He just stared at the wand in his hands.

"She's really gone?" Neville hoarsely asked.

"I promise," Harry said solemnly. "She'll never hurt anyone ever again. Of the four that attacked your parents, she was the last. I'm truly sorry I can't help them more, but I have repaid those who hurt them."

Neville hung his head and it was not hard to guess that he was crying silently. His Gran moved over next to him and put an arm around his shoulders to comfort him. It was so emotional, Harry wanted to join his friend until Daphne reached over and grabbed his hand, squeezing it to let him know she was there for him. Harry looked at her gratefully for her support.

After a few minutes, Neville raised his head, tear tracks still very visible. "The Lestrange brothers are gone as is Crouch Jr. All four of them." He paused and stared at Harry very intently. "You had a hand in those too, didn't you?"

Harry nodded. "Indirectly at least," he clarified. "I was there when Crouch Jr was found and was killed. I didn't know I was doing it at the time, but when I set Malfoy Manor on fire, that's what caused the Lestrange brothers to be caught."

"And now you've taken care of Bella," Neville finished for him. He suddenly rose and strode over to Harry. Realizing what Neville wanted, he stood and returned the hug Neville gave him, slapping him on the back. "Thank you, Harry," he hoarsely said. "The House of Longbottom will always be in your debt. Ask, and if I can do it, I will."

As Harry pulled back, he said, "And the House of Potter will always be there for you, my friend."

Harry heard a gasp behind Neville and looked to see his Gran holding a small sheet of parchment, the one that had been in the envelope he had given to Neville. "What is this for, Mr Potter?"

Neville walked over and looked at it. "Sixteen thousand Galleons? Harry?"

Harry only smiled at first before he sat back down. "If you don't know, I'm now also the head of the House of Black. Bellatrix was originally a Black." Neville and Augusta both nodded. "When Bella died childless, as her head of house, I was able to claim her vault. I took one item that had meaning to me and a few books. The majority of the rest of the objects in there were sold and added to the gold that it had. I would have liked to have helped everyone she hurt, but I decided to split it three ways, in memory of: Sirius, Frank, and Alice. That is approximately two-thirds of her vault."

"You don't have to do this, Harry..."

"No, I don't, but it seemed like the right thing to do. Please take it. I'm sure that St Mungo's is not free." Harry said with a kind smile, trying to be as sensitive as he could on the topic.

Neville looked to his Gran, who gave him a wan smile and nodded. "Thank you, Harry. I know saying that is not enough, but thank you anyway."

"Anytime, Neville." Harry meant it too. "So that's all I have, how about we talk about something more fun?"

"Like what Neville said to Ron at school?" Daphne asked with a grin.

Augusta Longbottom graced Harry with a smile and a soft, "Thank you", as she left the teens alone.

"Well, it really needed to be said," Neville told them with a wry smile. "Ron was being rather stupid about it all, but then, that's typical Ron. You know, do something stupid without thinking, then wonder why everyone looks at him like he's lost his mind. Do you think that he'll figure out that he was wrong and change over the summer?"

Harry shrugged. "Maybe. I'm hoping that Ginny will clue him in, or else that Hermione will." He shrugged again. "With Ron, who knows? Maybe this will be the start of his growing up."

"So Daphne," Neville looked at her, "what do you think about the Gryffindor Golden Boy?"

"The Gryffindor Golden Boy?" Harry parroted with some incredulity.

"I didn't come up with it," Neville defended himself, "but I do know that's what some people call you." He turned back to Daphne. "So are you as taken with him as he is with you?"

Daphne's eyes seem to sparkle as she said, "Yes I am." She threaded her fingers through Harry's. "I've put a lot of work into him and I think I'd like to keep him."

"Good for you," Neville said with a chuckle as Harry blushed slightly. "Please do your best to make him happy. Merlin knows he deserves it after all the stuff he's been through."

"Oh, I am trying to make him happy, but he's been resisting. I guess I'll just have to try harder." She lifted her other hand and caressed Harry cheek, causing him to blush and Neville to laugh.

"Come on, let me show you around," Neville told them as he got up. He set the captured wand on the mantle before leading them off.

Harry had another enjoyable day with a friend. He was happy that Neville and Daphne got along so well.

He was tempted to drop by The Burrow to say hello to the Weasleys, but deep down, he knew that would be a mistake at this time. Ron needed time to think and Mrs Weasley would try to make him stay there or go back to the Dursleys. No, he would not go there; he would see them when the train left for school.

((A/N: One new chapter done, three more to go...))

Chapter 6

The next morning, Harry called Kreacher to find out how his task was going. Kreacher reported that "Thief Fletcher" had used the locket to bribe a Ministry official to avoid jail, and that she wore it most of the time. Kreacher thought he would have the locket by tomorrow, as he would steal it when she took it off for the night. Harry gave him the fake locket retrieved from the cave to put in the real one's place.

Since Kreacher expected to have the locket soon, Harry and Daphne spent the day planning and getting ready for their trip.

True to his word, Kreacher woke Harry up the next morning and presented him with the Slytherin Locket. Harry could feel the evil come from it. He thanked Kreacher, gave him some money, and told him to start cleaning up number 12 and to restore it to its former glory. Kreacher seemed pleased by that.

With the last Horcrux in hand, he went back to the cave and deposited it with the "dead" Voldemort. He also made sure he was very familiar with the cave, especially the point where Bella had entered the water.

With his quest complete, Harry and Daphne started their summer trip. They traveled to almost every major European city, spending a couple of days at each one. Harry had transferred a significant amount of money from his Gringotts account into a Muggle bank, where he could get a credit card. They lived a life of semi-luxury and slept together, although they did avoid sex. Harry thought Daphne would have gone there if he had asked, but he did not want to do that until he was really sure about the girl, and in his mind, that meant an engagement ring at the least, and preferably a wedding ring.

During the first week of August, Hedwig found him while he and Daphne were in Rome. Harry panicked for moment when he saw her, fearing something had happened to one of his friends. With a hand that trembled slightly, he pulled the letter from his owl and read it. While not a pleasant subject, he was very much relieved that his fears had not come true.

The next morning, he and Daphne, with Hedwig in a conjured cage, returned to England for a memorial service for Albus Dumbledore. They made it to Greengrass Manor with only a few hours to spare for changing clothes and getting ready for the big event. Harry was careful to make sure his scar was hidden under a glamour. At half two, the three Greengrasses and Harry took the Floo to Hogsmeade and walked to Hogwarts. The grounds were filled with white chairs, with a low white granite tomb off to the side of the school.

As they entered the grounds for Dumbledore's memorial service, Harry was approached by Minerva McGonagall. "Mr Potter, may I have a moment for a short conversation?"

"Certainly, Professor. What can I do for you?" he asked in a low voice to match hers. He had the impression she wanted this to be a private conversation, but did not want to be noticed putting up privacy charms.

"Actually, I wanted to know if you would do something for us. In addition to the obvious people speaking at this memorial service, we had thought to have a few of his more prominent students say a few words as well. Would you be willing to do that?" she asked.

Harry considered the request for a few seconds. "I believe I shall decline, Professor. I hope that is not too much of a problem." If she was surprised by that answer, she did not show it.

"It is your choice, Mr Potter. However, I would like to know why, if you wouldn't mind sharing."

He looked over and saw the Greengrasses sitting on the last row, with Daphne saving him a seat. Perhaps McGonagall should know the truth, he thought. "Professor, while I do not hate Dumbledore, I also do not admire him as I once did. I respected his knowledge and ability to do amazing magic, but I no longer care to be considered his friend. Were I to speak, I fear that people may try to connect me with him as his apprentice, protégé, or something similar, and I do not desire that."

"I see," McGonagall told him, still not showing any emotion. She looked at him a moment longer and then nodded. "Very well, Mr Potter, it shall be as you desire. On another topic, I need to speak with you on school related matters very soon."

Harry was surprised, but it fit with his plans very nicely. "And I need to speak with you about something as well. Would after the service work, or would it need to be tomorrow?"

"Half an hour after the service would be acceptable," she told him.

"I shall meet you in the foyer then." Harry gave her a nod for good-by, which the older witch returned, and then he joined his girlfriend and her family.

The memorial service lasted about an hour. Harry sat there and appeared either unemotional or else so emotional he was lost in it. In reality, he was thinking back to all the ways Dumbledore had impacted his life. While some of them were good and even funny, Harry felt that most of the major impacts had been negative, starting with placing him with the Dursleys. If nothing else, Harry felt that Dumbledore had inadvertently taught him to consider other people's feelings when hard choices had to be made; he hoped he never forgot that lesson.

After the funeral, he told the Greengrasses about his change of plans. Daphne's parents returned home while Daphne stayed with Harry. They saw some of their friends from a distance, but neither of them really wanted to socialize, so they took a short walk around the castle instead.

At the appointed time, they met McGonagall in the foyer and followed her up to the Headmaster's office. She served them tea as she welcomed them.

"Miss Greengrass, it's a surprise to see you here," McGonagall said as she handed the young woman her tea. "I assume you and Mr Potter became friends this summer?"

Daphne smiled. "No, Professor. We became friends after the Christmas holidays when Harry prevented Draco Malfoy from assaulting me."

The woman paled. "You mean when Mr Malfoy was found in the dungeon corridor with a ... an accusation written on his bare chest?"

"Yes," Daphne answered. "However, Harry did not become my boyfriend until this last April."

McGonagall blinked rapidly several times. "I was not every aware that you two spent any time together."

"That was our choice, as I did not want to endanger Daphne should Malfoy and others of his ilk find out about us," Harry explained.

"I suppose I can understand, although I'm saddened that you felt like you had to hide your relationship," she admitted.

"As am I, Professor. However, with Malfoy gone, I think most of the trouble is gone as well. I found the school to be reasonably nice to attend for the first time after he was taken away," Harry said very seriously.

"I suppose I can understand that too," McGonagall told them a little sadly before she changed topics. "Mr Potter, I asked to talk to you because as the new Headmaster, I wanted to know if you would be Head Boy this coming year."

"Me?!" Harry almost squeaked, but managed not to. "I wasn't even a prefect for either of the last two years."

McGonagall still kept her sad look. "You would have been prefect if Professor Dumbledore had not overruled me, as you were my recommendation. But to your question, there is no requirement that the Head Boy come from the list of sixth year prefects. Your father was in the same boat," she told him with a smile now coming to her face.

Harry considered that as Head Boy, he would have his own room, and that seemed like a very good thing, considering how well he and Daphne were getting along. Despite his surprise at being asked, he casually said, "Yes, I'll take the position." McGonagall smiled. "Who is the Head Girl going to be?"

"It will be Miss Granger."

Daphne chuckled and looked at Harry. "No surprise there."

"No, not at all," he grinned. He was glad the two girls got along, because Daphne would be spending a lot of time with him in the Head Suite rooms.

"I will also need to speak with both of you about your duties before school starts. I do hope you plan to be available during the week before the term starts," McGonagall queried.

"Yes, I do," he told her.

A rare smile came to McGonagall's face. "I want you to know that I have had a very difficult time stopping a manhunt for you, Mr Potter. It was only the assurances of Miss Granger that allowed me to believe that you were in no danger."

Harry chuckled and Daphne joined him. "I bet it was difficult. I'd also bet the most vocal was a red-haired mother."

"That is not a bet I would take, Mr Potter, as the outcome would be too obvious. In fact, I'm surprised she did not approach you this afternoon."

"I purposefully kept a low profile, and only a few people even know to look for me with the Greengrasses." Harry considered the problem. "I suppose I will not be able to put that off past the first of September, will I?"

"No, Mr Potter. You must ride the train as Head Boy. If I am lucky, perhaps I can get away to watch that confrontation on Platform 9 ¾," she said with a rare smile.

Harry thought she was joking, but he was not totally sure. "Oh well, I'll cross that bridge when I get there." He looked at Daphne, who grinned at him, which he interpreted to mean that she had an idea on how to deal with the strongly opinioned Weasley matron. "While I'm here, Professor, I need to borrow the Sword of Gryffindor from the school. I will return it when I return to school."

McGonagall eyebrows rose to the top of her forehead. "What on earth for?"

"Did Dumbledore ever mention Horcruxes to you?" he asked casually, wondering how much the old man had shared.

"No! And what do you know about the vile things, Mr Potter? That is not knowledge the average person should know," the new Headmaster firmly told him.

"But then, I'm not average either," he grinned. "Dumbledore had asked me to keep them secret, but I see no reason not to tell you now. That was how Voldemort kept himself alive, and that was what Dumbledore and I were tracking down when he was injured. I now have all of them in my possession, and my theory is that the sword will destroy the Horcruxes, then I can dispose of Voldemort himself."

"Horcruxes? As in he made multiple?" she asked aghast, ignoring the last part of his statement.

"Yes, Professor."

The woman shuddered before she got up and walked over to a glass case. She handed Harry the famous sword, now housed in a simple leather scabbard, before returning to her seat.

"Thank you, Professor," he told her. Then as casually as he could, he said, "By the way, I also vanquished Voldemort at the end of last term." She gasped and he enjoyed her reaction. "He's presently sleeping with a Draught of Living Death, so I'll also use it to kill Voldemort in a week or two. You won't have to worry about any attacks from him next year." Her shocked expression was amusing to

him. He was shocked when the old woman came over and hugged him. Harry saw Daphne quietly laughing at him in his predicament.

When McGonagall returned to her seat, Harry asked, "If I may know, can you tell me how Dumbledore died? I thought he was supposed to recover from his poisoning?"

The sad look came back to McGonagall. "The poison did not kill him; however, the poison did accelerate the curse he had on his hand."

"Oh, I see," Harry said, nodding slightly as he processed that. "Was there anything else you needed to speak with me about?"

"Just one last thing." She stood again and retrieved a box from the side of the room and put it on the table in front of him. "Professor Dumbledore left this for you."

Harry opened the box, and to his amusement, he saw that Dumbledore had left him his large Pensieve, a number of memories in phials, and a notebook. Quickly looking at the notebook, he saw all of the old Headmaster's notes on Tom Riddle, including many of his guesses on locations for Horcruxes. To Harry's surprise, two of them were correct. Perhaps it was unfair that Dumbledore had died without knowing that Riddle was taken care of, but Harry decided not to lose any sleep over it. In and of itself, the Pensieve was a spectacular gift.

"Thank you, Professor. I shall use this well." Harry put the notebook back and closed up the box. "If there is nothing else, we shall go and leave you to your duties."

"I shall send you an owl for our meeting. Please expect it the week before the term starts. Also, your book lists will be owled this week," she told them. Their business concluded, the teens left for Greengrass Manor.

One other thing Harry did, while he was back in England, was to write thirty-three letters. They were very special in that they had three

charms on them, all devilishly hard to cast and one of them took a lot of power.

The first charm was on the envelope and made it so only the intended recipient could open it, and anyone else who touched the envelope felt very compelled to give it to the recipient.

The second charm was on the letter and it was charmed to be a Portkey to the middle of a hidden underground lake.

The last charm was a magical signature suppressant charm, and hid the other two charms from detection. It only worked when the magic of the caster was stronger than the magic of the person doing the detection spell, but since Harry was probably the strongest magical person in England with “willpower” based spells, that was not much of a problem.

All the letters were dropped off at the Diagon Alley post office and the postage was paid for by a pretty brunette who turned blonde a few minutes later when she entered Gringotts Bank.

Daphne joined Harry in the bank lobby and they proceeded to find a goblin in charge of Wills. An hour later, he had a copy of his parent's Last Will and a new vault key. In the vault, Harry found a lot of money and various investment papers. He also found an envelope with a letter to him. He found the letter described where he could find Potter Manor, which brought tears to his eyes as he considered what his life might have been like growing up there with his parents. He was glad Daphne was there to help him through those moments.

Leaving the bank, they went out into the Muggle world and held up a wand. The Knight Bus soon appeared and took them on their way. Harry would have Apparated, but he had no idea where the address was. That reminded him that he needed to go get his Apparation License -- probably tomorrow.

Half an hour later, the bus dropped the couple off at the end of a lonely country road. Walking down the road, Harry felt wards as he walked through them. When he did, he suddenly saw a large manor

house that had not been there before. It also appeared to be very well kept.

Daphne looked at him and merely said, "Looks nice."

They walked up to the front door and, not sure what else to do since they had no key, Harry used the knocker. A moment later, the door was answered by a house-elf in a maid's uniform. "Master Harry!" she squealed. A pop brought another house-elf, but this time in a butler's uniform. "Master Potter."

"Uh, hi, I'm Harry and this is Daphne Greengrass," Harry said, unsure of the exact situation.

"Welcome home, Master Harry. Please come in. I is Mopsy and this is Del. We is serving your family since shortly before you is born," the female elf told him.

"Right, ah, pleased to meet you. This is really a nice place, you've done a good job of keeping it up." The elves beamed with pleasure. "If I can ask, why did my parents leave here and go to Godric's Hollow?"

The elves looked sad and Del answered. "This house is well protected with much magic, but it can be found. Master James and Mistress Lily left with you to a place that was supposed to be better hidden, but it was not enough. We have been waiting for you for years, hoping you would come."

"I'm sorry, but I didn't find out about it until today. Uh, could you show us around?" Harry asked. The elves were delighted to play tour guide and for the next three hours, they showed Harry a lot about the Potter ancestral home.

As they got ready to leave, promising the elves he would be back in a couple of weeks, Harry asked his girlfriend, "So, do you like it well enough to live here?"

She gave him a coy smile and a happy, "Yes."

Harry still had not fully decided about Daphne, but he was finding more and more that he liked about her every day and fewer reasons not to take their relationship to the next level.

With a new Apparation license in his hand and their obligations done in England for the moment, the couple returned to traveling, this time to the very south of France, planning to stay there for their last two weeks or so.

Three days after Dumbledore's memorial service, the Daily Prophet reported that a number of very prominent men in the Wizarding World had disappeared the day before. It was commented on that many of these men had been suspected of being Death Eaters in the first war with You-Know-Who, although they all had claimed being under the Imperious curse. The theory that all of the missing people were Death Eaters was considered by the Aurors and many others. One Senior Undersecretary, namely Delores Umbridge, also disappeared at the same time. Even those who favored the conspiracy theory said it was merely coincidence that Umbridge disappeared on the same day; as much as she was disliked, no one thought that she was a Death Eater.

In the end, no one could say if there was a connection and there were no clues to the perpetrators in the disappearances. A few wives said they saw their husbands opening a letter and then disappearing, but the letter and envelope had gone with them. All the rest had simply disappeared. The Aurors left the cases open should new evidence become available, but they moved onto other crimes after a week of nothing to show for their investigations.

When the middle of August came, Harry was sitting in a lounge chair enjoying the sun on the beach of the French Riviera thinking about his summer and a very important decision he was going to have to make very soon.

Contemplating his life now and possible future directions, he noticed and avidly watched a very shapely girl in a blue bikini walk towards him. The bikini matched her eyes perfectly. The Muggle outfit also reminded him of a few memories from when his Pureblood Wizarding Princess started to adjust to the Muggle world at the beginning of

their summer journey. Some of those times had been absolutely hilarious.

The first time she had walked into a room and tried to turn the lights on with her wand instead of the light switch was amusing. The best example had been when they had settled into their first hotel room. Harry had picked up the remote control for the telly and turned it on when she was standing next to it. Daphne had jumped and drawn her wand at the same time and was a word away from hexing the noisy box when Harry fell on the bed laughing. She had not been amused and he had lain bound for the next hour while she cooled off.

After that, he had shared many ideas of how to live the Muggle way with her via Legilimency soon after her missteps, which really helped to speed up her adaptation. He was also very pleased that she did not shun the Muggle world, as many Purebloods did.

"Hey beautiful," he called to her when she got near.

She leaned over and gave him a kiss. "You don't have to tell me that every day, but you don't have to stop either," she teased him.

"If it gets me kisses like that, I don't mind," he teased her back.

Daphne looked at him very intently for a few seconds before she sat on his lap, straddling him. Grabbing his head with both of her hands, she snogged him senseless over the next few minutes.

When he could think straight again, which was still difficult as she was still in his lap with her ample chest in front of his face, he asked, "What was that for?"

"For being you," she told him before she smiled very prettily at him, "and for ending the war, even if most people don't know that it's over yet. I also just received a letter from my parents saying they have officially stopped negotiations with the old geezer for my arranged marriage and that they would be delighted to discuss options with you, Harry."

"W-what? N-Negotiations with me now? For real?" he sputtered. This was going faster than he had expected.

"Sure, Harry. They don't need protection from Voldemort anymore, so I can marry whomever I want to. Since I told them I love you and they've decided that they like you, they assumed they needed to start negotiations with you," she told him sweetly and batted her eyes at him, still with a big smile on her face.

He gulped. "I really love you, Daph, but are we even old enough for that?" Harry really thought all of the conversations at the beginning of the summer with her parents were to let them date, then allow for the possibility of marriage should he and Daphne desire it later.

"Legally, yes, since we're both seventeen, but we don't have to get married now, Harry. They just want to discuss the topic with you and work out an agreement. Like all parents, they want the best man for their daughter and that means you. It's a real bonus that I already love you." At his still shocked look, she added, "Get used to it Harry, it's the custom of Pureblooded Wizarding families. In fact, once you show the world that Voldemort is dead, you're going to have a lot of marriage proposals." An impish grin came over her now. "But you can avoid them if you make it known that you're already engaged."

Harry thought about that. She did make some sense about all the attention. He had destroyed the Horcruxes two weeks ago right after he got the Sword of Gryffindor. And he had planned to bring Voldemort's body out, stab it in the heart once, and then let the Ministry throw it through the Veil of Death in the Department of Mysteries when he returned next week. He knew he'd get a lot of attention from that, but marriage proposals?

She leaned down and deeply kissed him again. "Tell me how you really feel about me, Harry? Is it possible we could work out something permanent between us?" She had a hopeful look on her face.

He swallowed again, but thinking was very hard with this gorgeous girl in his lap, his hands on her bare sides, and she had "huge tracts

of land" that were barely covered less than a foot away from his face. "Uh, why? I mean, why are you asking?"

"You mean besides the fact that I really do love you?" He nodded. "I'm just being my ambitious and cunning self, Harry. I also think that combining that with your brave and courageous self, plus the brains both of us have, we could make a great couple who could do almost anything -- including changing the world for the better. Don't you think so too?"

Closing his eyes, to block out the very tempting distractions, seemed to help him think better, so he kept them shut for a few minutes. Daphne did not talk to him and let him be, although she did play with his hair and caress his head. He decided he really liked that. "You make some excellent points," he finally admitted. He also had to admit that as far as he knew, she had never lied to him, and that was a big plus. She was also telling him up front exactly why she wanted him. He wondered how many girls would be that honest with him.

To top it all off, their summer had been really wonderful. They had rarely fought and had gotten along very nicely. Their personalities complemented the other. While everything was not perfect, as each of them was not perfect, Harry thought that a life with Daphne in it would be pretty damn good.

Again she leaned down and kissed him so thoroughly he did not care what else happened to him. "I really do love you, and I just want you to be happy, Harry. I think I can take care of you better than anyone else, but in the end, I just want you to be happy and to enjoy life with you. If it matters, I also think that you and I could make a few very nice looking children one day, too."

Harry's eyes snapped open at the thought of a family. "That sounds really nice, Daph. So, whose side are you going to take while I'm negotiating? If I'm to take the first marriage proposal I get, I think I should get something really special."

Daphne smiled so large, Harry thought it might break her face. "You'll get me," she told him while she wiggled her eyebrows.

"You're someone. I'm talking about something, isn't that tradition?" he teased her.

She laughed. "Yes, that would be my dowry, and I think you'll be pleasantly surprised."

"I was joking," he told her, suddenly serious when he realized she might not be joking.

"I'm not. I do think you'll be happy with it; I'll make sure you are."

"I'd be happy with just you," he told her.

"Just as I'd be happy with only you, but it will be nice to have the other stuff. It makes life so much more comfortable," she chuckled.

Harry agreed, enjoying the sight of her chuckling, as he thought about how he had taken one third of the gold in Bella's vault, not to mention what he had in his family vault and what he had inherited from Sirius.

"Maybe we should head back soon so we can see your family for the last week or so of summer and discuss it then," he suggested. "Having you with me when we show the world that I've vanquished Voldemort should help cement things too."

"Sounds good to me," she agreed and kissed him deeply again.

Harry held her tightly as they snogged on the beach. He decided that life with the Ice Queen was very good.

Harry awoke to feel the early morning breeze that gently came through the open window. It was slightly cool and he would have been under the covers, except that he had someone covering a good part of him already. The sight of the almost naked blonde-haired beauty draped over him brought a smile to his face. He lightly kissed the top of her head. Ever since their little talk on the beach a few days ago, when they had decided that Harry would make a marriage offer for her, she had dispensed with her pyjamas, sleeping only in her knickers. It was another indication to Harry that she was serious about him.

Daphne had also spent a good part of the last few days teaching him about those Pureblood traditions that he was about to run into when he talked with her father again. In the midst of all of that, they had also developed several strategies that he could pursue with her father. She seemed to think all the possibilities were covered, but Harry was not as confident. After all, he was the one who had to negotiate; she just had to sit there and look pretty during it all.

By the time Harry had gone back over their plans in his mind yet again, Daphne stirred. She blinked her eyes open, smiled at him, and stretched up to give him a short closed mouth kiss before she got up. Harry could not help but stare; it was a sight he did not think he would ever get tired of seeing. She just smirked at him, knowing what she was doing, and sauntered off to the bathroom with a purposeful wiggle.

She was such a tease, Harry thought as he got up and started getting dressed. Daphne was also the best thing that had ever happened to him, he decided.

After a filling breakfast, they checked out of their hotel and went back to Potter Manor. Harry dropped his things off and changed to his finest wizarding clothes, while Daphne also changed and freshened up. When they went to Greengrass Manor, Harry need to look the part of the head of his house, much like he had a couple of months ago when he had first met her parents.

They had a light lunch and discussed the plan one more time. Looking at the clock, Harry noticed it neared one in the afternoon, the time he had said they would arrive when Daphne had written her parents back. Since he was now keyed into their outer wards, he and Daphne Apparated to the front door. It opened even before they could knock. The Greengrass house elf bade them to come in and took them into the parlor. It took all of Harry's Occlumency skill to keep a calm appearance as he saw her parents again.

"Ah, Mr Potter, welcome back," Mr Greengrass greeted him, much friendlier than the first time.

Daphne momentarily left his arm to hug her mother and then peck her father on the cheek before rejoining Harry, who had just shaken Mr Greengrass' hand.

"Thank you, sir, it's nice to be back here." Harry took the proffered seat, with Daphne sitting beside him. The two couples faced each other. He had momentary thought of sporting event, where two teams dueled each other.

Greengrass took a brandy from the tray the house elf was carrying around. His wife and Daphne each took a glass of wine, which left the last brandy for Harry. He hoisted it up slightly in a 'thank you' toast and then sipped. While he had to fit in socially, now was not the time to lose one's head to strong drink.

"I think business before pleasure, if you don't mind, Mr Potter. After all, if we work everything out, that will make the pleasure so much more ... pleasurable," he said with a smile at his own little joke.

Harry chuckled with the others. As Daphne had pointed out to him, a little flattery and sucking up was not necessarily bad, as long as it was not overdone or terribly obvious.

"Very well, sir. I'd like to discuss your daughter with you. We've had the opportunity to get to know one another over the summer and we both consider an arrangement to be advantageous. If I ask for your daughter's hand, what would you offer?" Harry felt like he was trying to buy Daphne, which almost made him ill, but he did his best to ignore that feeling and pretend this was the way things were done. On the other hand, Harry promised himself that his children would not have to deal with this.

Greengrass looked briefly at his wife and they both had large pleasurable smiles. "That is good to hear, Mr Potter. Our daughter's welfare is very important to us. I would offer you double the standard offer as well as a pledge of support of my house to yours."

Harry glanced at Daphne and saw a very brief flicker of surprise. He assumed that the offer of twice the normal twenty-five thousand

Galleons was what had surprised her. He took that to mean that Greengrass was very serious about this. "You are most generous sir," Harry told him with a slight nod of his head and took another sip of brandy to give him a quick moment to think more. Daphne said not to take the first offer, no matter how good it was. "I am inclined to accept your offer, but I would like two small additions."

"Oh?" Greengrass did not look offended; he had apparently expected some negotiations.

"Yes, sir. Just two small things, one for myself and one for my future wife."

That seemed to surprise the man, but he silently waited to see what Harry requested.

"For myself," Daphne had stressed that her father saw the world in a very male dominated way, "in addition to the alliance of our houses, I would like your personal word to work with the other Pureblood families, especially those who are considered 'Darker', to try to moderate them. I would like to have a world where my children do not have to worry about conflicts such as the one I had to just fight. I think a more neutral world would be to everyone's advantage." Daphne had agreed that making it look like Harry wanted everyone to be more like her father would be an easy sell.

Greengrass was definitely surprised by the request as he took a rather large drink from his brandy and looked at the goblet for a long moment as if seeking advice from it. "And you will see to those who are considered 'Lighter', to try to moderate them?" he asked Harry.

Harry grinned. "That was my plan. I think a wider acceptance of views would be a good thing. I've already started with my best mate at school, and I believe Daphne has plans for me that will allow for me to affect the Wizarding world at large." He felt his girlfriend squeeze his arm as he picked up the gauntlet and accepted her vision for his future in front of her parents.

Her father stared for a few seconds and then started to chuckle. "So, she already had you wrapped around her finger, huh lad?"

"I wouldn't say that," Harry quipped, not willing to show any weakness, even if his statement was true. "I would say that she has convinced me that her vision of us has advantages that should be grabbed, especially for the advantage of those who do not think for themselves." Harry would have preferred that everyone learn to think for themselves, but he had eventually come to see Daphne's point that a significant percentage of the population never would. The trials he had personally faced from the public were examples he could not ignore.

"Agreed," Greengrass told him succinctly, before he added, "if you can try to change half the world, I'm willing to try to change the other half. And the other request?" he asked curiously as he looked at his daughter.

"Daphne says she's always been very fond of the villa you have on the coast of Spain." Her father inhaled sharply. "Knowing that it is not an insignificant investment, I would propose that for the time being, we simply be given freedom to use it whenever you are not. I only ask that it be promised to her now."

Hugo Greengrass relaxed as he heard the rest of the request. He again took another large swig of brandy before a grin appeared on his face, a grin that Harry was not sure he liked. "A rather large request, although tempered to be realistic. I can see my daughter's hand in this." He looked at her and smiled. "Therefore, I have a request as well, one that will affect her too. In exchange for that, I request that she have an extra child, and that child shall have the name Greengrass." He looked at Harry as he said the last part.

Harry understood. With only two daughters, he was the last of his line. Yet, he had said child, so they could assign that position to a girl, which would not really help the man. He would have preferred to discuss this with Daphne, but that was not possible. He would have to deal with this himself. But what would Daphne do, he asked himself. He took a sip of brandy and glanced at his girlfriend, who was merely looking to him, as if to see what he came up with.

"We have agreed that we both want children," Harry said slowly, almost thinking out loud, "but we have discussed little more than that." An idea was starting to form. "My dear, how many children do you want to have?" He hoped asking Daphne her opinion did not make him look too weak, but he really did not think it wise not to get her opinion on this.

Daphne looked at him and it was obvious she did not know where he was going with this, but she answered the question. "I had planned on two, although a third might work if we needed to so as to have at least one boy and one girl."

Three or four sounded good to Harry, so they were close enough for agreement. He looked back at her father. "I can agree to that," Harry heard an intake of air next to him, which he assumed meant that she was surprised or else disagreed with him. "However," he added and noticed that Daphne was staring hard at him, "if Daphne should have a third son, I will allow my second or third son to become a Greengrass-Potter, and when that choice is made, the villa is signed over to Daphne, although you may visit and stay there whenever you wish."

Greengrass contemplated that. He too seemed to be thinking out loud. "You would have an heir and a spare, and let mine line live on too?"

Harry nodded. "Of course, there is no guarantee of a third son, but we will have a third child if it is within our ability to do so."

The man looked at his brandy glass for a moment before he looked to his wife. Both shared a sad look. "Yes," he drawled, "there are no guarantees in life, are there?" He finished off his brandy and set the glass down. "That is extremely generous of you. I agree, Mr Potter." He smiled largely and stood, pushing his hand out. "I believe we have a deal."

Harry stood and took a step forward and shook the man's hand. "It appears we do." He had barely disengaged his hand when he was whirled around and soundly kissed. Daphne was a handful, but she was wonderful, he thought. The expression of delight on her face almost took his breath away, it held so much promise of happiness.

"I shall put all of this down on parchment so that we may review and sign." Greengrass looked at the clock in the room. "We can have the signing after dinner."

"Of course, sir." He looked at Daphne. "If you'll excuse me, I need to go run a quick errand. I shall return in time for dinner." She got a pouty look, which Harry had to admit was very cute in its own way. "Don't worry, I will return and you'll appreciate my short absence later." Daphne did not look thrilled, but she slowly let go of him. As he turned, he saw her father looking at him with a smile, as if he knew what Harry was about to do. Since he was a man too, it was quite possible he did understand. After a quick kiss, Harry strode out of the Manor and Apparated away.

A few seconds later, he was walking down Diagon Alley, heading for Gringotts bank. Inside, he asked to go to vault #17. After a cart ride that gave him at least a few seconds of free fall, the goblin brought him to #17 a few minutes later. Harry opened the vault by placing his hand on the door and walked in. He was sure he had seen some of these here earlier.

Taking longer than he had wanted, he finally found the chest he was looking for. He made up for the earlier delay by quickly finding the item he wanted. Slipping the item into his pocket, he left the vault and took the long cart ride back up. He made it back to Greengrass Manor for dinner with only a few minutes to spare. His greeting from Daphne was very enthusiastic, even more so than before he left, which surprised him.

Dinner was a very joyous and boistrous affair. Harry heard how Hugo and Cassandra had gotten together and stories from their early marriage, as well as stories from Daphne's childhood. He was sure, from the look on his girlfriend's face, that they were told with the purpose of embarrassing her. While he was happy not to be in her shoes at the moment, it did make him wish that his parents were here to join in.

After a truly wonderful chocolate mousse for the pudding course, Mr Greengrass led them all into his study. There, he picked a parchment

and a quill off the desk and handed them Harry. "You may want to read this before you sign it."

Harry's eyes went wide. He recognized the quill. "That's a blood quill," he said with a chill in his voice.

Greengrass shrugged as if something of no importance had been said. "It's what makes magical contracts binding."

With more incentive to read carefully than before, Harry slowly went over the contract, contemplating each sentence and what it could mean. Mr Greengrass had written exactly what they had discussed with no surprises thrown in. The only extra language was about marriage in general. He now understood why the Wizarding world did not have divorce -- except through death. "As this affects you too..." Harry handed the contract to Daphne.

She looked a little surprised at him offering it to her, but she took it and started reading. Mr Greengrass continued with his passive look, calmly waiting. Harry saw Mrs Greengrass study her daughter; her look was not hard to interpret. The woman might be about to gain a son, but her daughter's focus was about to change. Her daughter's life would now revolve around someone other than her.

Daphne handed it back and nodded, not saying a word. Harry wondered if that was by design or if she was as scared about this as he was. It was a monumental step in his life and he wished his father was here. Stretching out his arm to pull the sleeve of his robe up, Harry put the contract on the large desk and bent over. With a flourish, and a grimace at the pain on the back of his hand, Harry signed the contract for the House of Potter. He handed the quill to Daphne since her name was on it, who signed it without the slightest indication that she felt a thing from the quill.

The quill was then handed to Cassandra Greengrass, who signed on the witness line. Finally, Hugo Greengrass took the quill and signed it for the House of Greengrass. As the final signer, the contract glowed white for a second before it faded back to its normal state.

Harry felt no different, but he realized he was now bound for life to the young woman beside him. Turning, he looked at her and smiled. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out the object he had retrieved from his vault. Getting down on one knee, he held up the ring with a large diamond on top and simply said, "Will you marry me?"

Daphne put her left hand in front of him and he slid the ring on. It sized itself down to fit her finger. She smiled down on him and pulled up on his hand a little go get him to stand up. Then she kissed him softly on the lips. "Thank you, husband."

While he had a goofy grin on his face at the thought of her being married to him, he was puzzled. "I will be after the wedding."

"True," she told him, "but it's also true now, too. The wedding is the public statement of our new relationship. The contract is the legal indication of our relationship." She gave him a sly smile and waited for him to figure it out.

When it hit him, Harry almost fell over. For all intents, he was married right now. He heard Daphne laugh; he was sure the expression on his face was amusing. However, it did not help when her parents joined in.

"I believe a toast is in order." Greengrass picked up a bottle from a silver bucket and popped the top off, before he poured its contents into four fluted glasses. Based on its easy availability, Harry assumed it had been placed there shortly ago just for this. "To Harry and Daphne Potter, I wish you long life, much happiness, and," he now grinned at them, "many children." The glasses clinked and they all drank some Champaign.

Greengrass put his hand on Harry's shoulder. "You may call us Hugo and Cassandra, if you like."

"Or Father and Mother," Cassandra added with a caring smile. "I know I could never take your mother's place, Harry, but if you need a mother figure in your life, I'm available."

Her offer and their new friendliness and casualness were a balm to him, and he welcomed it whole-heartedly. "Thank you ... Mother," he told her with strong emotion in his voice. Cassandra seemed to understand and walked over and gave him a firm hug, which he returned. It was very comforting, and not as dangerous as a hug from Molly Weasley, who he was sure would break one of his ribs one day.

"Why don't we sit down and talk," she suggested. "I believe Daphne is almost done packing, but she still needs a few more minutes."

His -- wife -- blushed and then smiled. "I'll be ready in about ten minutes, Harry. Then we can go to Potter Manor." As she walked out of the room, Harry could not help but follow her with his eyes.

"So, Harry, I hear that you're to be Head Boy this year. That's quite a feather in your cap," his new father-in-law said.

"Yes, Hugo." Harry let a little of his Slytherin side out. "While the duties may take more of my time than I'd like, I'm sure the position will help open a few doors one day."

Hugo smiled. "Planning for as many contingencies as possible is never a bad thing, Harry. What do you plan to do after school?"

He wanted to shrug, but Harry kept that desire in check. He still wanted to maintain his image with this man. "I had once considered being an Auror, but I believe I've spent enough time dealing with evil wizards." Hugo nodded in understanding, as did Cassandra. "Daphne has suggested a Quidditch career, as it will keep my name in the spotlight for later opportunities. That has a certain appeal and is probably my top consideration. Did you have any suggestions, sir?"

"Actually I have given it a little thought over the last month," he said with a grin. "It would not be hard for me to get you a job in the ministry, especially after you deliver a dead Dark Lord in a couple of days, but think I have to agree with my daughter on this one. Witches love a 'knight in shining armor' while most Wizards can relate to a Quidditch player. Put together, I can easily get you a seat on the Wizengamot in a few years. Get a little experience under your belt and make a few connections, and you'll be advising the Minister

without any problem. After a little time there, I think you'll be a shoe-in for Minister," he finished with a big grin.

Harry considered it. He was not sure if that was really for him, but he could see it happening if he wanted it. "Ambitious and yet, I think it could happen," he replied tactfully.

"Of course it could," Hugo boasted. Cassandra looked on with laughter in her eyes. She turned a smile to Harry and winked at him.

Harry wondered if that was Cassandra's way of saying that her husband always had a plan going, much like Daphne had told him once. He was about to reply when he heard a noise behind him and saw Cassandra put her hand over her mouth. She looked like she was about to cry. He turned around and saw an absolute vision of loveliness.

Daphne was standing there in one of the sexiest robes he had ever seen. It was white and revealed little, yet promised everything. Her hair was made up and there was a white flower behind one ear. "I am ready, my husband," she simply said.

Finally remembering to breathe, Harry sucked down a big gulp of air. His heart was beating a mile a minute. He did not remember standing, yet he was in front of her, his eyes never leaving her. Grabbing her hand, he slowly lifted it to his lips and softly kissed her knuckles. "My wife," he said with much emotion in his voice.

She gave him a smile that lit his heart and sensuously batted her eyes at him. Her eyes not leaving his, she said, "Father, Mother, we shall send you an owl when Harry will proclaim his triumph. I believe it will be on Friday morning. Please be ready. I shall not see you until then."

Harry continued to stare into her mesmerizing blue eyes, barely cognizant of what she was saying. However, when she pulled on his hand to start him moving, he easily followed her. She placed her hand on his arm and he escorted her to the front door. There, she smiled with humor all over her face as she reached up and closed his eyes with one hand.

“Concentrate on your front gate Harry.”

A few seconds later, he felt himself being pulled through space as she Side-Along Apparated him to the Manor. It was probably good that she did, as he was unsure if he could have done it without splinching himself. He continued to stare at her as they walked up to his front door.

When Mopsy opened the front door, Harry came out of his fog.
“Thank you, Mopsy.”

“You is welcome, Master. Good evening Mistress Daphne.” The elf curtsied. “Your things are in your room, Mistress.”

“Thank you, Mopsy,” Daphne replied elegantly. “I don’t believe we’ll need breakfast until late in the morning.”

“As you wish, Mistress.”

“Good night, Mopsy,” Harry told the elf as he continued to escort Daphne to the master bedroom. “How did you get your things here?” Harry asked his new wife.

“She smiled at him. I sent them over with Solly, with instructions to give it all to Mopsy. Elves coordinate things like that all the time,” she told him as if it should have been obvious.

Harry considered that. It made sense, but he had never really thought about it before. Of course, now was really not the time to think about it either. When they came to the master bedroom, Harry closed the double doors and saw shadows as light flared behind him. Turning, he saw all the candles of the room lit and Daphne setting her wand down. He went back into his mesmerized fog as she gave him a sultry smile and then kicked off her shoes. He saw reach behind her and heard a zipper, before she slowly reached up and pulled the shoulder straps of her dress off of her delicate shoulders.

Daphne kept eye contact with him for the entire time and she smiled even bigger at Harry's face as she let the dress fall off of her, revealing her in all of her glory.

Harry drank the loveliness of her natural form in. He had seen her in only her knickers before, but there was something about seeing all of her that was very special. He watched her slowly slink over to him, her hips exaggerating their motion.

"Come my love, make me your wife," she said breathily.

Harry gulped and walked towards the bed with her, although he did not think he would be sleeping much tonight.

The sun was well in the sky by the time Harry opened his eyes. He had blonde hair covering most of his chest, hair that belonged to the naked woman lying next to him with one of her arms over his body. That reminded him last night and caused a reaction in him. With a devious smile on his face, he slowly woke his wife in a way he had only dreamed of before. It would be yet another hour before they got out of bed and headed towards the bathroom. Based on the last twelve or so hours, Harry thought marriage was a great idea.

As they both got out of the shower, a time extended by playfulness, Daphne told him, "Enough for now, Harry. This may be like our honeymoon, but you need to get dressed. We have a lot to do today."

"I'd rather us do a lot while undressed," he told her with a smirk.

She replied with her own smirk before she turned and walked towards her closet, wiggling her bare bum at him. He groaned and she laughed. "We'll have all evening and night to do that, Harry. However, today we have to set things in order here and we have to set things in motion for your big event at the end of the week."

"Like what?" he asked, while intently watching her put her knickers on.

"Like keying me into the wards so I can Apparate into the house and a host of things now that I'm your wife," she explained.

He took a moment to reply, as he was watching her put on her bra.
“Sure, but what’s the hurry?”

“It’s not a crisis that those details are not done yet, but all of those little things will make life for both of us much easier.” She selected some light blue robes. “Hurry up, Harry. Get dressed -- NOW!” He jumped as she shouted and then chuckled at him. However, he was ready to go by the time she was, as he did not have hair to fix up and makeup to do, even if she did put very little on.

When they arrived at the breakfast table, Mopsy had a little bit of everything there, as she was not sure what they liked yet. Del was also there and he handed Harry a letter.

Harry was surprised to read a letter from Kingsley Shacklebolt.
“Daphne, why would Kingsley be telling me that we have an appointment to see him at four?”

She speared some fruit as she told him, “Because I wrote him in your name yesterday, while you were gone just before dinner, and said that you needed an appointment with him in the afternoon about an important matter pertaining to the war. I also told him that he should coordinate that with the Minister’s schedule, as he may want to bring your news to the Minister’s attention.”

“But...” He blinked hard a few times.

“You were busy and this is the sort of things wives do for their husbands. All right, technically I wasn’t for another couple of hours, but I knew it was going to happen and you need to get this done as soon as possible in case there are political matters to work out,” she explained.

Munching on his toast he looked at her as he thought that through.
“You mean they might object to me killing Voldemort?”

“Harry,” she sighed and fixed him with a stare for his apparent denseness. “You’re essentially doing their job, so yes, they might be a little pissed. That’s why we’re meeting with Shacklebolt. If you get the head of the DMLE to sign off on it all, then there will be no

problem, and that is our goal. I do not want to have to visit you in Azkaban just because we forgot to say ‘mother may I’. I happened to have really liked what we did last night,” she gave him her sultry smile again, “and this morning.”

“Me too,” he said, again remembering their first time together.

Not much was said after that, although there were a lot of smiles and smirks passed back and forth.

By a quarter to four, a number of arrangements had been made with Mopsy and Del. Daphne had been keyed into the wards, Del had gone to the Ministry for various forms, which they had filled out and returned, plus a number of other details that Harry did not realize had to done when people were contracted to be married. That included a minimal Last Will for both Harry and Daphne.

They Apparated to the Ministry and went through the wand checkpoint before proceeding to Shacklebolt’s office. They were ushered straight in.

“Mr Potter,” the new head of the DMLE smiled and greeted him.

“Director.” Harry shook hands with the man. He looked at Daphne and remembered what she had told him. “I’d like to present my fiancée, Daphne Greengrass.”

The Director’s eyebrows quickly shifted up. “Miss Greengrass.” He politely took her hand. “I had heard rumors about various forms coming in about Potter and Greengrass, but I thought they were just gossip.”

Harry groaned. “I’m not safe from gossip anywhere.”

Shacklebolt gave a deep laugh. “No, Mr Potter, you aren’t.” His smile disappeared and the tall man turned serious. “There are some words being exchanged about you that are not very kind though.” Harry quirked an eyebrow. “As you know, some of us watch over you during

the summer and you gave us the slip. That has made some people very unhappy as they are quite concerned about your safety.”

“And what do you personally think, Director?” Harry asked very calmly.

The man did not look pleased to be put on the spot like that. “I think my personal opinion doesn’t really matter. Albus Dumbledore thought it was vital that we protect you and you did not allow that.”

“I am my own person and legally an adult, Director. My life is my own. As such, I did not tell Dumbledore everything he probably needed to know, just as he did not tell me everything. However, I can tell you that I was very safe.”

“You did survive,” Shacklebolt conceded.

“I did, and the reason for that is what I did not share with Dumbledore, but I will share it with you now.”

The head Auror’s eyes narrowed. “This is why you wanted an appointment with me?”

“It is,” Harry agreed. “I need to make sure that nothing untoward would happen to me, as my fiancée put it, if I should bring the body of Voldemort in.” It was as if Harry had stunned the man. Shacklebolt just stared at Harry, not even blinking. “Director?” Harry finally called after ten long seconds.

Shacklebolt shook his head. “Excuse me, but I thought you just said you wanted to bring You-Know-Who’s body in.”

“Who should I know?” Harry innocently asked. The man looked like he wanted to smack the younger man in front of him. “You’re the Director of the DMLE and you can’t even say his name? Shame, shame, Director.”

A low growl came from Shacklebolt. “Do you really have Voldemort’s body? And if so, how did you get it?”

"I'm sorry, but my question first. Were I to bring a dead Voldemort in, or better yet, take him to a public place like Diagon Alley, stab him in the heart, and then hand him over to you, would I be in trouble with the law?" Harry quickly tacked on, "Hypothetically speaking."

The Director glared at him, but he did look like he was thinking it through. Nearly half a minute later, he finally said, "I do not believe there would be any problems, but there are some parts of the law that might be of concern to you." He paused and tilted his head slightly, as if a strange thought had come to him. "This didn't happen recently, did it? You're the reason we've had a quiet summer, aren't you?" He grinned. "That's why you felt it safe enough to ignore Dumbledore. Damn, Harry, why didn't you tell us?"

"There was a lot Dumbledore did not tell you. For example, did you know there was a prophecy made about me shortly before I was born?"

"I had assumed so, based on what happened two Junes ago. Do you know what it said?" Shacklebolt was leaning forward, eager for the information.

"A spy heard the beginning of the prophecy and took it to Voldemort, which is why he came after me. It starts off: The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches, born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies... I guess Dumbledore never told anyone that?"

"No, but Potter, that's too generic. It could apply to anyone," the man retorted.

"It continues," Harry said, "and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not, and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives." He casually moved the hair on his forehead so his scar was visible.

The "mark" was not lost on Shacklebolt and his eyes went wide. "You were the only one who could kill him?" he asked incredulously. Harry nodded. "Damn! It all makes sense now. And you have him?"

"I'm not saying," Harry firmly said. "This is all hypothetical until I know that if I were to bring him in, I would not face any punishments."

The head Auror stared for a moment, drumming his fingers on his desk. "Right, I understand. Stay here please. I believe the Minister will be joining us -- even if I have to drag him here myself." Shacklebolt left his office with long strides.

Harry smiled and looked at Daphne, who smiled back. "So, how do you think it's going?"

She leaned forward and gently kissed him, a kiss that promised more later. "You're right, I do think he's a good guy. There's still the possibility for trouble, but I'm not overly concerned at the moment." They held hands and lightly snogged for a few minutes, breaking apart only when they heard rapid footsteps coming their way.

Shacklebolt entered the office and closed the door behind another man. While Harry stared at the Minister for Magic, remembering the less than pleasant meeting with the man during his sixth year, the Director was putting up privacy spells.

"Mr Potter, it's good to see you again," the Minister said in his usual semi-gruff manner, holding out his hand. Harry shook it. Rufus Scrimgeor's turned slightly. "Good afternoon, Miss Greengrass. I've heard that congratulations are in order, and by the ring on your finger, it appears they are correct."

Daphne blushed prettily. "Thank you, Minister."

Shacklebolt went to his chair behind his desk, while the Minister pulled out his wand and made his own chair.

"Mr Potter, I understand you have a question for the Ministry," Scrimgeor said. "You want to know, hypothetically, what would happen if you brought the body of Voldemort in. Is that correct?"

"Yes, sir. Although, if I may be bold with a suggestion?" Scrimgeor nodded, and Harry smile as he continued. "I would actually phrase it

as: Would there be any legal problems for me were I to show up in Diagon Alley at noon on Friday with Voldemort's dead body and hand it over to someone like Director Shacklebolt and maybe even yourself?" The Minister sat there stunned for a moment. "It seems to me, that people should know about the war being over and seeing it first hand would help the public."

When the Minister recovered, he asked with a grin, "And a little publicity for yourself and maybe the Ministry too?"

Harry shrugged. "Personally, I'd prefer not to have to deal with any of it, which is why I'm asking just before I head off to school. However, my fiancée has pointed out to me that it might be useful for me in ten or fifteen years."

Scrimgeor's laughed. "Listen to her, lad, and you'll go far. How are you keeping him contained? You don't seem to be in a hurry."

"I'm sorry, Minister, but this is all hypothetical at the moment while I'm seeking a legal opinion," Harry calmly said with a slight smile. Had he been older with a long beard and had a twinkle in his eyes, he would have been appalled at his own appearance.

The Minister looked at Harry for a moment before he asked, "Did you commit any crimes while accomplishing this heroic act? Hypothetically..."

Harry smiled, "Were I to do something like this, I would not do anything an Auror would not do."

A gruff chuckle was heard. "A nice vague answer Potter. Come see me when you're ready for politics. Between your wife and myself, you'll have no problem being Minister one day. Shacklebolt!" he barked the man's name. "Pull me out a form M-zero-zero-eight-six."

"Yes, sir," the Director said with enthusiasm.

Harry looked at Daphne, who only shrugged slightly.

The teens waited patiently to see what the Minister was doing. He took the form from the Director, as well as a quill from the desk and started filling the parchment out. After a few minutes of scratching, he set the quill down and handed a piece of parchment to Harry.

Harry held it so that Daphne could see it too and they read:

Letter of Pardon from the Ministry of Magic in England

Let it be known that Harry James Potter shall not be held accountable and may not be prosecuted for any illegal actions -- should any be found -- for the pursuit, capture, or release to the Ministry of Magic for the wanted criminal commonly known as Voldemort, whether said criminal shall be dead or alive.

It was signed by the Minister and dated today. A legal free pass. "I assume you'll want to duplicate this first?" Harry asked.

Scrimgeor held up a duplicate that he had already made. "That one is yours. Now, how are you holding him?"

Harry smiled. "I hope you'll forgive me for leaving out a number of details, but I accidentally came upon him when he was not feeling very well. Fortunately for me, he did not know I was there, so I managed to subdue him and forced a phial of Draught of Living Death down him."

"I see," said the Minister with a bit of glee. He looked at Shacklebolt who had a look of admiration on his face.

"It's amazing what the right potions, spells, and large dollop of luck can accomplish." Harry's grin had not diminished. "From there, I just hid him very carefully until I was ready to hand him over. Because, well, let's say that he had done a few rituals to keep himself alive, which is why he did not die when I was a baby. I needed time to counter-act those rituals, and I just finished accomplishing that this month." It was nearly three weeks ago, but it was still in August.

"And you don't plan to tell us any more?" Scrimgeor looked a little put out, but he still seemed mostly happy.

"No sir, I really don't want to give any other evil wizard or witch any ideas. In fact, I'm thinking of saying even less than what I told you to the Press," Harry admitted.

"I can see your point of view," the Minister said somewhat testily, obviously wanting to know more. "Can you prove your claim, Mr Potter?"

Harry had been ready for this. He pulled out the picture of himself standing over Voldemort and handed it over.

The Minister slowly nodded. "Good enough for me." He passed the picture to the Director. "Shacklebolt, start arranging for enough manpower for Friday in Diagon Alley. A small platform might also be a good idea. I'll take care of the Press."

"May I make one more suggestion?" Harry got the go ahead. "I think it would be a very good idea to take the body directly to the Veil in the Department of Mysteries. If he's thrown through it, then there is no body and nothing for anyone else to work with, should someone still want to revive him."

Scrimgeor grunted. "Shacklebolt, make that happen. Good one, Potter. Ever think of being an Auror after you get out of school?"

Harry almost laughed. "I did for a short while, but I think I've had my fill of evil wizards. I have one question about Friday. How do we get there without having to go through the crowd that will be there, and how do we get away afterwards?"

"I'll provide a Portkey which will take you directly to the platform," Shacklebolt told him. "Afterwards, you can take a Portkey with us back to the Ministry. I'm sure you'll want to be on hand when he's thrown through the Veil."

"Thank you, Director, and thank you, Minister," Harry graciously told them. "Do you have a private Floo we can use? If those rumors about us are really going around, I'm not sure I want to go to the public Flooies."

Both Ministry men laughed. "You can use mine, Potter," Shacklebolt told him, pointing behind him.

"Thank you, Director. Oh, Director, there's one reporter I'd really rather not see on Friday." The two men gave him confused looks. "If you check, I believe you'll find that Rita Skeeter is an unregistered Animagus. She can become a beetle, which is how she gets all of her scoops." As they looked at him in amazement, Harry led Daphne to the fireplace. A few minutes later, the Potters were home.

An early dinner with smoldering looks between the newlyweds was had. Afterwards, they retired for the evening, while the elves stayed busy in the kitchen -- a room far away from the master bedroom.

Friday morning, a somewhat tired but very happy Harry Potter got out of bed. He still could not believe he was technically married. They had decided yesterday that the wedding ceremony would be held in December, probably on Boxing Day, so they could spend the holiday with her family.

At eleven in the morning, Daphne left to go get her parents, and to key them into the Potter wards, so they could Apparate onto the grounds directly.

At that same time, Harry left to return to the cave. He supposed he should not have been surprised that he found a number of pieces of paper floating in the lake. Taking out a knife and a phial of poison he had brought, he coated the knife with poison and stabbed Voldemort in the chest several times, before he threw the knife as hard as he could out into the lake. The last of the poison was poured into Voldemort's mouth and then the phial was also thrown into the lake. Daphne had suggested it as insurance against anyone trying to revive the Dark Lord, should the body not make it to the Veil.

His task completed, he conjured a plain robe over the "corpse", and then a burlap bag. With the bag floating after him, Harry left the cave and returned to his home. The body bag was left outside by the front door.

Not surprisingly, Hugo wanted to see the body before they left, so Harry let him open the bag. The man's hand flinched a little, but otherwise, Hugo only stared at it for a long moment before he pulled the bag back around the body. Hugo said nothing other than a simple, "Thank you."

At noon, the four were standing outside, with Harry holding onto the bag as well as the rope Portkey Shacklebolt had sent. A few seconds after the Portkey triggered, the group found themselves on a short stage in Diagon Alley near the end where Gringotts Bank was located. There was a small sea of people present, which was not surprising. An "announcement of major importance" for this time and place had been published in the Daily Prophet for the last two days, courtesy of the Ministry of Magic.

Look around the stage, Harry saw many of the Ministry heads, the Minister himself, and of course, a large number of Aurors. Harry did not see Tonks, but he supposed that she might be in disguise as a surprise.

The Minister walked over to Harry and shook his hand. "Ready, Mr Potter?" he quietly asked in his gravelly voice and Harry nodded. "I'll make a short statement. I'll let you show the body and then make a statement yourself. There will be some questions from the press. I'll try to take most of those, but you'll have to answer some. After we're done here, Shacklebolt will get all of you to the Ministry for the last part."

Harry nodded again, more than ready to get it all over with.

Scrimgeor walked to the podium that held a wand sticking up from the front. "May I have your attention!" His amplified voice caused everyone to quickly become quiet.

Harry did not immediately see anyone in the audience that he recognized, which he felt was good, as that would have increased his nervousness. He was even more pleased not to see a certain reporter in the front with all the other reporters.

"I would like to make a major announcement," Scrimgeor's deep voice told everyone. "A few days ago, a concerned citizen came to the Ministry and offered to help with the present war. While we at the Ministry have been doing everything we can to end the war, we would never turn down help, especially from someone who has more experience fighting You-Know-Who than most Aurors. I am talking about Harry Potter." He held his hand out to Harry. The crowd applauded loudly.

Harry stepped forward one step and waved with a smile on his face. Daphne told him to act as if he liked it up there, even though she knew he hated it. A good image was important when dealing with the public. She also said that a lot of his problems in the past were simply bad PR that Dumbledore should have countered, and which she would never let happen again.

"Mr Potter has been most gracious in helping us to set up this announcement. It is with extreme personal pleasure that I can announce to you today, that the war is over." Complete silence reigned for a few seconds, and then a massive cheer went up. It took a couple of minutes for it to quiet down.

"As proof, we submit to you, the Wizarding world, the body of You-Know-Who." Gasps and a few screams were heard as Scrimgeor looked at him. Harry pulled out his wand and stood the bag and its contents up. With a flick of his wand, the bag vanished. A number of people screamed at the sight of the pale snake-like man in front of them.

Scrimgeor walked over when the flashes started going off, so it was he and Harry on the outside, as if Scrimgeor had contributed to the downfall of Voldemort. Harry was not worried though, the truth would come out.

After a few minutes, the Minister gestured for Harry to go to the podium, so he waved his wand to let the body down and walked over to make his statement. Photographs were being taken every second or two.

"I don't plan to say much, but I will say I am very glad for this war to be over. As you can probably imagine, it was very difficult for me to overcome Voldemort," there were a lot of gasps a few shrieks, but Harry did not stop, "but I'm glad I did it." A long applause was given and he had to wait for it to die down before he could talk again.

"A lot of good people have died because of this evil person, including my parents and my godfather. So I'm glad there will be no more loss of life. Sadly, a lot of the problem could have been prevented if many of you in the Wizarding world had pulled your collective heads out of the sand and done something sooner, when he was not as strong. I hope you think about that the next time an evil wizard tries to take over the world." Harry stepped back as a muted applause was given to him. They apparently did not like his message, but he did not care. It was the truth.

Scrimgeor stepped back up, a smile plastered on his face. "We'll take a few questions from Press before we end this press conference." A host of hands went up and Scrimgeor pointed at one.

"Did Harry Potter kill him by himself or did he only help the Aurors?"

"Mr Potter killed the Dark Lord in a fight and then brought him to us. We will throw his remains through the Veil of Death when this is done, so no one can try anything with his body." There were cheers for the answer and Scrimgeor picked another for a question.

"This is for Potter. How did you kill You-Know-Who?"

Scrimgeor motioned Harry forward.

"I had made some plans for if I ever found Voldemort," there were more gasps and shrieks, "and I accidentally did last June. Because of my plans and some luck, I was able to overcome him. I'm sorry, but I don't plan to go into more details, as I don't want to give anyone any ideas." Harry stepped back and more reporters' hands were thrust into the air.

Scrimgeor picked another. "This is also for Potter. You mentioned last June, so when did you kill him, and if it was done several days or even several months ago, why did you wait so long to tell everyone?"

Harry stepped back up. "I overcame him earlier in the summer. I waited to reveal this information because I needed to make sure he was really dead, and did not come back as he had after he tried to kill me as a baby. I am now sure that he is really and truly dead."

Another reporter was picked. "Mr Potter, what do you plan to do now?"

The Minister took that one. "Mr Potter still has one more year of school left, so he will be attending Hogwarts. After that, Mr Potter will have a lot of opportunities to choose from. Next question."

"Mr Potter, who is that with you on the stage?"

Scrimgeor looked at him and Harry smiled and stepped forward. "I'd like to introduce my fiancée, Daphne Greengrass." A number of high-pitched groans were heard as the smiling blonde stepped forward to stand beside Harry and latch onto his arm. Camera flashes were going off like mad. "She has been very supportive of me while I handled this matter. I look forward many years with her." Harry turned slightly and waved her parents forward. "This is Hugo and Cassandra Greengrass, her parents. They have been kind to me as well." As they stepped back, Harry gave the Minister a look that said he was ready for it to be done, before he plastered a smile back on.

The Minister took the podium again. "Thank you everyone for coming. We at the Ministry thank you for your support during the war. We also ask that you please limit your celebrations to private places or wizarding only places to avoid giving the secret of magic away to the Muggles. Thank you!" He started waving and nodding.

It was a happy occasion, but Harry was tired of all of this. He turned to find Shacklebolt, only to see him walking towards Harry. Mr Weasley was also trying to make his way over, but Harry just smiled at the man and moved his "family" towards the body. Shacklebolt held out another rope. Harry grabbed the rope and a fistful of Voldemort's

robes. He felt the pull of the Portkey just before Mr Weasley made it over. Harry felt a little bad about that, but not overly so. He had a job to do at the moment.

The small group landed in the DMLE. A few seconds two other small groups popped in. One had the Minister, while the other included an old witch that suddenly changed to look very young. Harry smiled at Tonks, who grinned and wiggled her eyebrows in Daphne's direction. Harry chuckled, knowing he would have to talk to her later.

"If you'll bring the body?" Shacklebolt told Harry. With a wave of Harry's wand, they were off.

A few minutes later, the group stood in a room deep underground. Harry could hear the whispering of voices from the Veil, but he did his best to ignore them.

"I believe you wanted to do this, Mr Potter, or else you believe you need to?" the Minister's deep voice asked.

"Thank you, Minister." As Harry prepared to banish the body into the Veil, he saw a photographer lift his camera. Harry hated that, but he could understand, now that Daphne had explained PR to him.

With a concentrated thought and a burst of magic, Voldemort's body flew through the air and went into the archway, disappearing forever. It was clean and simple. It was a relief to be done. It also felt anti-climatic.

Harry turned to his father-in-law. "Hugo, would you and Cassandra like to come over? Mopsy makes excellent meals and Del tells me there are some aged brandies available for after lunch." Harry did not plan to sip.

Hugo's eyes lit up. "We'd be delighted, Harry."

Scrimgeor looked like he wanted to say something to Harry, but the young man merely nodded to the Minister and quickly walked past him.

The afternoon was a pleasant time for Harry, with his in-laws staying through dinner. He was only a little tipsy after dinner. He and Daphne had most of the weekend to celebrate their marriage, while the rest of the Wizarding world celebrated the end of the war. Harry was happy to skip all the public celebrations.

Harry had a meeting with McGonagall and Hermione tomorrow morning, then the couple had to be on the train for school Monday. The summer was almost done.

((A/N: Two chapters done and two more to go...))

Chapter 7

Harry and Daphne were having breakfast at his home and Harry considering his day when Del popped in.

“This just came in for you Master.”

“Thanks, Del.” Harry opened the letter. It was short, but surprising. He really should not have been surprised, but he was.

“What is it, Harry?” Daphne asked.

“I’m afraid I’ll be a little later in returning from my meeting with the Headmaster. An old friend wants to see me.” He handed her the note and returned to his breakfast.

“Remus Lupin, as in our professor in third year?” she asked, very surprised.

“Yeah, he was a close friend of my parents. I’m sure he wants to know what I’ve been up to this summer, considering what was in the newspaper this morning,” he said with a grin. The Daily Prophet had his picture with a dead Voldemort splashed all over it. At the bottom of the front page was his and Daphne’s picture, with a title of “Boy-Who-Lived becomes Boy-Who’s-Engaged”. Daphne had been most amused at the second one.

“Would you like me to join you?” she asked. Her tone and expression were neutral, as if it did not matter one way or the other.

Harry considered her question and her intent for a moment. “Yeah, I think that might be a good idea. It would limit how much he might yell at me,” he said with a grin, speculating she really did want to be there. “Disguise yourself, say with red hair and meet me there at the Three Broomsticks at eleven. I think I’ll go as a blond to be a bit more inconspicuous.”

Daphne gave him a piercing look. “If I did not know you were irrevocably mine, I might wonder if you still had feelings for a certain Gryffindor girl.”

He looked at her for a moment, then it dawned on him what she was alluding to. He chuckled. "Sorry, my love, but you're stuck with only me. Ginny has her attractive points as most girls do, but she has some real negatives too, including one very big one. You are by far the better catch." He gave her a winning smile.

Her intense look softened. "Sorry, Harry, but I know there's a little history there and I've never really found out how deep it went. I know the thing with Cho was pretty superficial, but as Ginny was in your house, information on her was a lot harder to come by for me."

"I can see your point," he told her. "It's pretty much like you heard at the end of last term. She's reasonably nice and I do consider her a friend, much like I would Tracey. You probably don't know it, but I saved Ginny's life in our second year. I think that gave her a pretty big crush on me, which complicated our friendship for several years, but that's all we will ever have -- friendship. I consider her and Ron's family to be an extended family. They've been good to me and I hope to continue that, but Ginny is someone to me probably like Blaise is to you."

Daphne nodded. "I suspect that Blaise is more like Hermione to you, but I do understand your point." She smiled at him. "I'll see you later this morning with short red hair."

Harry Apparated to the front gates of the school and walked up. He was slightly surprised not to see Hermione there and have someone to walk with, but knowing her, she probably had arrived early to visit the library and was already in the Headmaster's office.

The front door was unlocked and he walked into the school. It was so quiet it was almost unnerving. At the Headmaster's office, the gargoyle that guarded the stairs was already standing aside. He was relieved as McGonagall had not given him a password. At her door, he knocked and heard her call for him to enter. Sure enough, Hermione was already there.

"Harry!" his friend called out and ran to him, engulfing him in a hug.

"Hi Hermione, how have you been?"

"Not as busy as you, it seems," she told him crossly. "Why didn't you invite us to help?"

He had been expecting this. "I answered that question in June, and the answer is the same. There was very little to do once I knew what had to be done, so there was no need to disrupt your summer. Besides," he gave her a lopsided grin, "I did come to visit you over the summer before I started my holiday travels."

She deflated, although she still did not look completely happy. "I had not forgotten. I did expect to see you at Professor Dumbledore's funeral. Why didn't you come?"

"I did." Her eyes narrowed as if she did not believe him. "I just kept a very low profile. If you don't believe me, ask Professor McGonagall. She spoke to me there."

"And good morning to you, Mr Potter" McGonagall smoothly greeted him, now that Hermione had paused.

"Good morning, Headmaster," Harry said cheerily.

"He was there, Miss Granger." The girl looked contrite and backed off. "Now if you both will take a seat, we can get started discussing your duties, responsibilities, and other matters pertaining to your office." McGonagall spent the next hour talking to them, and another half hour answering questions from Hermione.

Looking a little weary after Hermione seemed to have exhausted a long list, McGonagall turned to Harry. "Do you have any questions, Mr Potter?"

"Most of my few questions were on Hermione's list, so those are taken care of. I think I only have one left." His Gryffindor courage seemed to leave him as he considered how to bring the matter up.

"Well, speak up, Mr Potter." McGonagall commanded him when the pause became overly long, while Hermione looked at him curiously.

"I, uh, I've had a personal matter that has come up that might complicate things slightly..."

"Harry, I don't think you being engaged to Daphne will be a problem," Hermione told him. "I think we'll get along quite well. I enjoyed talking to her when she visited."

He nodded as a fun idea came to mind. "That's good, really good in fact, because she will be staying in my room for the year."

"Absolutely not!" McGonagall told him. "Visiting is allowed, but nothing more," she told him very firmly, almost daring him to disagree.

"So, you would not let my wife stay with me?" he asked tentatively, expecting a reaction from Hermione. He was not disappointed.

"Harry Potter! Did you elope yesterday? That would be so rash, even for you."

His blank expression turned into a small smile as he looked at his fuming friend.

"Please explain, Potter." McGonagall found her voice and it was now very thick with her Scottish brogue, an indication of how upset she was.

"Well, I think it has to do with you not quite understanding all the details." The older woman fixed him with a glare that said he better explain unless he wanted to become a chair -- permanently. "You must remember that the Greengrasses are an old-line or Pureblood Wizarding family. So I'm not just engaged to be married..." The Slytherin part of him purposefully left it hanging there, waiting to see who figured it out first. Unsurprisingly, the one with the better understanding of Purebloods did.

"Mr Potter, please tell me you did NOT sign a marriage contract!" The Scottish brogue was still thick.

Harry looked at his Professor, very tempted to echo her statement in jest, but her expression stopped him cold. "I did sign a marriage contract between the House of Potter and the House of Greengrass," he quietly said.

In the following silence, Hermione said, "But Harry, while that would make you betrothed, you're still only engaged. You won't really be married until the wedding. When is the wedding, by the way?"

"Uh, probably on Boxing Day, but you're first statement is wrong." She did not look happy to be corrected.

"He is quite right, Miss Granger. Technically, he is married now since he is an adult." McGonagall turned to him. "Mr Potter, please tell me you understood what you were getting into before you signed."

"I understood, Professor. Before I read the contract, I don't think I was aware of why divorce is basically non-existent in our world, but I do now. I had planned to be with her 'until death do us part' anyway, so I had no qualms about signing it."

McGonagall sighed. "Well, I'm thankful for that," she said with resignation and with her brogue disappearing. She drummed her fingers on her desk for a few seconds. "I'm left with only a few options. I can get a new Head Boy, but you really are the best person, so I will ignore that one. That leaves us with Mrs Potter staying with you in the Head Boy room, assuming Miss Granger is willing to share the common room for the Head Boy and Girl with the two of you; or I can move you into a guest room, such as those for visiting guests. I would prefer you to stay in the Head Boy room. What are your feelings, Miss Granger?"

Hermione looked a little lost. Harry assumed she was still coming to grips with the situation. After a moment, she said, "I think that will work, Professor. At least, I'm willing to try it at the beginning. If it does not work, then I suppose we can try the other solution."

"Very well," McGonagall said with a brisk nod. "Do you have any other surprises for me, Mr Potter?"

"Only that the Minister mentioned an awards ceremony sometime in the future, so I would expect to need an evening away from the school sometime soon."

"I expected that. If that's all, then please be on Platform 9 ¾ at half ten to help direct the students, especially the incoming first years, and I shall see you at the welcoming feast."

The two students said good-bye and walked out together. Once down the stairs, Hermione asked him, "Are you going to give me the details, or will you make me go research marriage contracts?"

Harry shrugged and led her towards the front door. "There's not much to say. The contract is written up specifying what each side will do or must provide, it's signed by the head of both parties, anyone affected, and a witness. Because it's a magical contract and signed in blood, it is binding until death. And like any other contract, it takes affect immediately. There's not much else to say, or if there is, I don't know about it."

She seemed to study him for a moment out of the corner of her eye. They walked out the front door before she spoke. "If I didn't know you as well as I did, I'd say it sounded like her father sold Daphne to you."

Only Harry's Occlumency allowed him to keep a straight face and not grimace, as that thought had crossed his mind. "Perhaps it all started that way centuries again, I wouldn't know," he told her, and he could see she was about to explode. "However, for the contract I signed, it's more like a marriage license and a treaty rolled into one."

Her explosion was momentarily contained, but not by much. "Explain."

"There is a part explaining marriage and it is for life, along with stating that Daphne and I would be joined when we signed it. But it also talks about the relationship between the House of Potter and the House of Greengrass, how we will treat one another and be allies. If Daphne doesn't mind, I suppose I can show it to you."

"I'd like that." Hermione sounded a lot more mollified now.

"However, I don't know that it will do you much good, because I strongly suspect that only the stating of the names may be similar among all contracts of this kind. I'm very sure that the alliance part is unique, as it only contained what Hugo and I agreed to verbally beforehand." He shrugged. "If you're really curious, you should go do the research, and then if you still want to see the contract, I can ask Daphne. I'm not sure if it should stay secret or not."

"I guess that's fair." She studied him as they walked towards the gate of the school. "What's it like, Harry? Being married, that is..."

"With the right person, it's wonderful, and I believe that Daphne is right for me. What have you decided about Ron?" He watched her grow a little pensive looking.

"It was hard, but I decided that I'm not going to wait on him anymore. Sort of like you, I'm going to go on with my life and if I find someone I want to date, I will. I do still like Ron, and if he grows up and asks me out when I'm free, then I'll date him, but otherwise I won't."

"I see..."

"Harry, please don't tell him that. I'm not convinced that he likes me, so if he really doesn't, I'd prefer not to put ideas into his head." She was almost pleading as she said the last part.

"I understand and you can count on me," he told her with a grin. "For what it's worth, I think you're making the right decision."

"Thank you, Harry." They were at the gates, so she stopped him and gave him a hug. "Since you're already taken, I guess I can safely tell you this." She paused and looked down for a second, as if gathering her courage. "A small part of me is jealous of Daphne."

Harry was very surprised.

"I mean, I really do think of you like a brother, but I know you're really not." She blushed slightly and looked back down. "And, well, you're

essentially Muggle-born too, Harry, and I wonder if we could have worked out; but like I said, it's only a very small part of me and I valued our friendship far too much to ever think about doing anything more that could hurt the friendship we have."

Harry put a finger under her chin and raised it up so he could look into her eyes. They had their disagreements, but he did think of her as a true friend. "Hermione, I value our friendship more than any other I have, except for Daphne's. I don't know what would have happened if you had said something, but I can say that I don't think I'm good enough for you in that way."

"Oh Harry, you always think you're not good enough, but you're wrong about that."

He chuckled and drew her into another hug. "Daphne has been correcting me of that, but in this case, it's true. One day, you'll find someone good enough for you and you'll both experience something very spectacular." When he pulled back, she saw that she had unshed tears in her eyes.

"Thank you, Harry," she softly said.

"I'll see you Monday morning, OK?" She nodded. "Take a moment before you go to center yourself. I don't want you to splinch yourself." She snorted with a little laughter. "That's my friend." With a smile, he thought carefully about the back of the Three Broomsticks and Apparated away.

A second later, he was behind the pub. With a quick flick of his wand, he applied a few glamours and his hair was now golden blond and shoulder length, in the style similar to what Draco Malfoy wore. He walked around to the front and entered the pub.

Looking around, he saw a familiar looking face with short dark red hair at the bar, and a booth with Lupin in it. The redhead woman was watching the front door so their gazes locked when he looked at her. He smiled and winked at her. She winked back and held up two fingers and pointed towards the private rooms. He nodded and then walked over to where Lupin sat.

“Don’t say anything,” he quietly told Lupin, who was looking at him curiously, “and follow me.” Turning around, he noticed the woman at the bar was gone. He went towards the private rooms and found #2. Entering, he saw her with a tray of Butterbeers. Harry held the door open for Lupin and then closed it behind him.

“Who’s she?” Lupin asked, his hand slowly going for his wand.

“That would be my wife,” Harry told him with a grin, enjoying the prank. He pulled out his wand and canceled his glamours. Lupin was looking at him in shock. Once he was back to looking normal, Harry cast a few Finites at the woman. “Remus Lupin, please meet Daphne Potter, formerly Greengrass.”

The woman, who now had blonde hair to the middle of her back, strode forward to stand next to Harry. “Professor Lupin, it’s good to see you again, although you may not remember me.”

Although he was still staring, Lupin found his tongue. “I’m sorry, but all I remember is that you were quiet and a good student … and a Slytherin, if my memory is correct.”

“It is,” she said somewhat challengingly.

Harry stayed out of it, watching.

“And do you truly love Harry, the real Harry?”

“I probably know him better than anyone else, so I can say that I do love the real Harry,” she said seriously.

Lupin’s face softened. “Then I would thank you to take care of him, for he is very special to me. I also hope that we can get to know one another too. And please don’t call me Professor, for I no longer am. You may call me Remus or Moony.”

“Moony?”

He gave a tired smile. “An old nickname from school.” He turned to Harry. “You’ve been busy.”

“I have.”

“Do I need to yell at you for running away this summer?” Lupin had a wry grin as he asked.

Harry returned the grin. “No, I think that Hermione and McGonagall have done enough of that, although I suspect Molly Weasley will try to add to it on Monday.”

Lupin laughed. “Of that I have no doubt. Why don’t you tell me about your summer? While mine was quite boring, it sounds like yours wasn’t.” He grabbed a Butterbeer and took a seat.

Harry guided Daphne over and they took a seat and a drink. “Actually, my summer has been very restful...” Harry spent the next two hours talking and laughing with his friend. By the end, Daphne had a new friend too. When they parted, Lupin had an invitation to Potter Manor on Christmas Eve.”

Harry and Daphne showed up at the train station at half ten, as requested. Hermione was already there, as expected. They took their trunks to a compartment. Daphne stayed there, holding it and waiting for her two best school friends. Harry went back to the platform and helped Hermione direct students, especially the youngest ones.

While Harry avoided a lot of problems from his fame by wearing his hair a little longer and making sure his scar was not visible. It did not totally help, as so many people knew him. It seemed like all the Gryffindors said “Hi Harry!” when they passed him, drawing attention. He bore it as best he could.

However, at ten minutes before it was time for the train to leave, the recognition he had hoped to avoid the most, yet knew he probably would not be so lucky to, arrived. As he again repeated instructions on what to do to a lost looking first-year, he heard his name shouted by a familiar voice.

“Harry Potter! Where have you been?!”

Harry looked up as he sent the first-year off and saw a group of redheads. The mother of the family had her hands on her hips and was fixing him with a glare. She had been the one to shout at him. Taking Daphne’s advice, he smiled and walked over to talk to them. However, instead of responding to the question, he ignored her. “Hey Ron, good to see you again.” He grabbed his friend’s hand and slapped him on the shoulder.

Ron numbly stood there and mumbled, “Hey, Harry.” The red-haired boy looked like he was walking on eggshells.

Molly Weasley stood there open mouthed at being ignored.

“Ginny, I trust you had a good summer?” He gave her a brief hug, which she returned.

“I’ve had better and worse,” she told him with a grin and a glance between him and her mother, as if she realized what he was doing.

As he let Ginny go, he saw Daphne walk up out of the corner of his eye, with her usual “Ice Queen” persona.

“Harry Potter, you will not ignore me,” the woman finally got out, in an overly loud voice.

“Hello, Mrs Weasley, I hope you’re doing well.” Still ignoring her outburst, he turned past her to her husband, who had his usual happy-go-lucky look, although he was also glancing between Harry and his wife. “Mr Weasley, you’re doing fine I trust?” He shook the man’s hand while the next onslaught came.

“Harry, you will tell me why you’ve run off and put yourself into danger this summer, why you thought you had to fight a war all by yourself, and why you’re getting mixed up with darker Pureblood families.”

His eyes narrowed. The first two accusations he could have easily ignored, but not the third. “Mrs Weasley, I would kindly ask you to

keep your opinions of those things which you know nothing about to yourself."

"Don't you talk back to me, young man. I did not raise you to be disrespectful."

Harry kept his temper tightly in check with his Occlumency and his tone level and calm, and only loud enough for the Weasleys to hear. "Mrs Weasley, I appreciate the kindness you and your family have shown me over the years, much more than I can express. Because of that, I think of all of you like an extended family, and you, Mrs Weasley, like a favorite aunt. However," his voice turned colder, "an aunt is not a mother, nor are you officially part of the Potter family. I'm not answerable to you for my actions no matter who told you to watch over me and no matter how wise you thought him." He continued on not giving her a chance to get a word in. "I'm also seventeen and the official head of a family. I can make my own decisions. If you do not like my decisions, you may nicely tell me in private, but to shout it at the top of your lungs on a train platform or with a howler, like you tend to do, should be beneath a person of your station in our society."

She gaped at him, not saying a word.

Harry let his good natured expression and voice come back as he held out his arm for Daphne. "This is my intended, Daphne Greengrass. Now, if you'll excuse us, the train is about to leave and my intended and I must be on it. Good day Mr and Mrs Weasley." He escorted Daphne to the train, encouraging those standing around to board, before he gave Daphne a hand up. A perplexed Ron and a smirking Ginny came along a minute later. Looking across the platform, he could see Mr Weasley trying to lead a bewildered looking Mrs away. Damn, Daphne was spot on with her advice and he owed her a massage tonight -- not that that was a bad thing. In fact, massages always ended in a very intimate manner, he grinned as he remembered.

When the students were on the train, Harry jumped on too, just seconds before the last whistle blew and the train started to move. Quickly, he made his way to the prefect cabin up front.

Harry got a number of looks when he arrived. He was not sure if that was because he was Head Boy without being a prefect, or if it was because of his publically known relationship with Daphne, or if it was because he had killed Voldemort. Of course, it might have been all three.

Hermione brought the meeting to order and explained duties and handed out patrol schedules. He let her run it, as she seemed to thrive on that sort of thing. He supposed, she was the brains and he was the brawn of the team. Not that he would ever say that to her, as it might get him hexed with a spell he had never heard of before.

At the end of the meeting, Harry leaned over to Hermione. "I need to borrow the compartment set aside for us for a talk with someone. OK?"

She nodded. "Go easy on him, Harry."

"Easy but firm," he replied. "Tracey!" He called out before she could leave. "Would you tell Daphne I'll be there after another conversation?"

She grinned at him, knowing what was about to happen. He and Daphne had visited her for an afternoon a couple of days ago.

Harry turned to his old and almost best-friend. "Ron?" He waved him towards the door. Ron nodded and followed, although he did not look to be anticipating this, which Harry could understand.

"Can you stop by later?" Ginny asked him. "Bring Daphne too."

"I'll see what I can do," he told the sixth year prefect, wondering what that was about.

He ushered Ron into the compartment reserved for the Head Boy and Girl, sealing the door and putting up privacy charms before taking a seat. Ron was looking less eager by the second.

"Ron, I will have to tell Daphne a summary of what we talk about, but I promise I won't mention any details."

He nervously nodded. "Thanks for that."

Harry took a deep breath to start, careful to keep an even voice and even emotions. "Now, if I remember correctly, at the end of last term, you told me that all Slytherins were bad and I had made a bad choice in choosing Daphne for my girlfriend as no Slytherin could be trusted. I said that labels, especially Hogwarts house labels, were not useful for judging people, and that you can only tell if a person is good or bad after getting to know them. Now that you've had all summer to think about this, what is your present opinion?"

Ron stared at his hands very carefully. "Harry, I uh, I thought about this some over the summer." He ran a nervous hand through his hair. "I suppose I can understand what you're saying, sort of like I can understand a Wronski Feint."

Harry had to smile. Leave it to Ron to use Quidditch analogies.

"But Harry, I can't do a Wronski Feint and it's really hard for me to believe otherwise about Slytherins. I mean, look at Malfoy and what a ponce he was over the years. And Snape, he was the greasiest git we both ever saw. I know that not all Slytherins are Death Eaters, but a lot of them are. There's just been too many bad examples."

Supreme disappointment hit Harry, and his face must have shown it.

"Hey, don't look at me that way. It's just the way I am; it's what I've always believed and been taught," Ron said as if clinging to a life line.

Harry shook his head. "I'm not sure I believe that, Ron, but let's talk about it in case I'm wrong. If you've always been taught that, then you learned it as a child and, therefore, you learned it at home. If so, who taught it to you?" Ron remained silent.

"I don't think your mother and especially your father would, or did they?" Ron shook his head to deny it.

"OK, Bill and Charlie were old enough to have gone to school and met Slytherins by the time you were five. Did they teach it to you?" Again, Ron shook his head.

"I'll admit to not knowing Percy very well, but I doubt he would either."

Ron snorted. "No one knows Percy very well," he said of his estranged brother. At the questioning look from Harry, he shook his head again.

"Now, I know that the twins love to play jokes on the Slytherins, but I believe they do that because of the Gryffindor-Slytherin rivalry, not out of hate. Wouldn't you agree?" Ron did.

"And while I'm sure Ginny is not nearly as innocent as she appears to be at times," Ron snorted again, "she's always struck me as a very fair-minded person, her dating Dean being a prime example. So tell me Ron, who taught you that Slytherins are all bad?" He sat back and watched his friend struggle with the question, not planning on saying a word to rescue his friend.

Ron fidgeted and went back to examining his hands. After a couple of quiet minutes of breathing, Ron finally looked up. "You're not going to let me just go on like normal, are you?"

A wry grin came to Harry. "No, Ron. I will not do what I did in our fourth year." His friend winced at the reminder of his disbelief of Harry before he went back to looking at his hands.

Finally, Ron looked up. "Look, it's like this. I want to believe what you tell me, I really do, because I want us to be best mates again, and even I'm not blind enough to see that won't happen unless I tell you I've changed. But I honestly can't Harry, I just can't."

Harry did his best not to react to the disappointment coursing through him at hearing that. "Why?"

"I don't know, Harry. You know I'm not good with this feeling and reasoning kind of stuff. About the best I can tell you is that it's just too hard. I've believed this all of my life and it's hard to change something

like that. Like I said, look at Malfoy. I've just seen too many bad things from him."

In a small way, Harry understood. He would never like any of the Dursleys, but he was beginning to let go of his anger towards them. Understanding their situation and point of view, of his presence being forced upon them, had helped him the most. That gave him an idea.

"Ron, you say you have a hard time believing what I'm telling you because of Malfoy, right?"

"Right." He seemed weary of saying that, as if he knew there was a trap there, but he could not see it.

"Then you should know, Ron, that Malfoy was not a true Slytherin."

"What are you talking about?"

Harry chuckled. "Malfoy was in Slytherin house, but he did not act like a true Slytherin. To be honest, that was not something that occurred to me until I got to know Daphne. There is the idea of Slytherin, to be ambitious and cunning, working behind the scenes to get what you want, while making sure that you don't get blamed for anything bad while receiving any good credit that comes along. That's a real Slytherin, but if you think about Malfoy, that does not describe him at all, except for maybe some of his sixth year. His first five years, he was immature. The Slytherin ideas were in him, but he ignored them and, like you said, he was a ponce. But he was such a big ponce, we tend to only think of his first five years. Does that make sense?"

Ron looked at Harry very carefully. "I suppose. I mean, you're in Gryffindor, and most of the time you act like a real Gryffindor, but you're not always -- sorta like now."

He could not help the laugh that escaped him, and Ron weakly joined in. "No, I'm not. Didn't I once tell you that the Sorting Hat wanted to put me into Slytherin?"

Ron looked like he has swallowed a fly. "I uh, I guess I forgot about that."

"So in a sense, you're condemning me too." Harry barely contained the humor in his voice, and glee from Ron's sour reaction. "I have a suggestion, if you'd like to hear it."

"Please!" Ron seemed almost desperate.

"I believe you have a real problem to fix, but I also understand that Malfoy and stories you heard about him growing up may have unduly influenced you." Ron nodded, grasping onto this explanation with both hands, so to speak. "I can accept that and I believe Daphne will too, as long as you promise to try to get to know Daphne and her friends. If you'll promise to spend some time around them and not make stupid biased remarks, I believe you'll find that Slytherins can be normal people and you'll change your thoughts. It will give you some time, but you have to be honest in trying to change. Can you make that promise?"

Ron looked back down to think; it appeared that he was praying based on his posture. After a minute or so, he looked back up. "I'll believe you that far, Harry. I'll promise to spend some time with you and Daphne, doing my best to keep my pratish mouth shut. I'll do that and see what happens."

"And if you find out I'm right, you'll apologize to both Daphne and me?"

Ron swallowed several time. "I will," he quietly said.

"You're still my friend, Ron, but I hope you'll understand that this means we won't be best friends again until you apologize. I want to be best friends with you, but a best friend of mine wouldn't say what you did to Daphne and me."

Guilt appeared in his expression and he looked down. "What about Hermione, Neville, and Ginny?"

Harry sighed, wishing Ron would grow up faster. "That's between us and them, but if it will make you feel any better, they don't have a problem with Daphne or Slytherins in general."

"It doesn't," Ron said with a short sad snort.

"I'll tell Daphne that you're working to get past Malfoy's example, but you need to be really doing that."

"I will," Ron promised again.

Harry pulled out his wand and took down the privacy charms.

His friend stopped him from leaving. "Harry? Do you remember telling Hermione that you changed your mind and that she should not continue after her goal, but change because she was too intelligent?"

"Yes," Harry drawled, surprised that his friend had remembered that and wondering where this was going.

"Was that a reference Hermione and me?"

Very quickly, Harry shored up his Occlumency walls and let his mental blackness wash over him for balance. "As I said last time, that was an opinion between Hermione and me. It was also a conversation that both of us have decided to keep to ourselves, much like you and I talk about things I don't share with her."

Ron hung his head. "It's just that I've been thinking a lot about her this summer," he said to his shoes. "I've been wondering if I've missed a chance with her."

Harry smiled only because he knew Ron could not see him. "Honestly, I can't say if you've missed your chance or not, but I can tell you that if you want to take a chance with her to find out if things would work, then you need to be the man that Hermione needs. It will take a special person for her. I couldn't do it, but perhaps you could with some work." His friend's head snapped up. "I can't say for sure if it would work out between the two of you, but then again, you'll never know if you don't try."

"Thanks, Harry, I'll think about it."

"Think carefully about what she wants, like someone who has many interests, not just one or two. Someone who can carry on an intelligent conversation..."

"That lets me out," Ron said sarcastically.

"No Ron, it doesn't. It just means you can't do it right now, but with some work, I think you could. And don't think that I meant you have to know everything, you don't. You just have to be able to discuss things well and without fighting."

"But we always disagree."

"Disagreement is all right, it's how you disagree that's the problem. Pay attention to your next fight and you'll see," Harry told him with a smile. "I'm going to find Daphne, I'll see you later."

Surprised at the conversation, Harry considered it and his friend as he walked down the train. He said hello to many people, mostly because they called out to him. He honestly could not have named half of them. When he passed Theo Nott, the Slytherin boy gave him a strange piercing look, which mystified Harry.

Soon he found Daphne, Tracey, and Blaise. To his surprise, Ginny was also in there and she was laughing. Daphne had an infectious grin on her face. This might not be good, he thought. With a deep breath and his Gryffindor courage, Harry joined them.

Daphne gave him a big smile and a peck on the cheek when he sat in the empty place beside her. "How did it go?"

"Not as good as I'd hoped, but better than it could have."

"My brother didn't apologize, did he?" Ginny asked somewhat accusingly.

"No, I'm afraid he didn't." Daphne did not look happy. "However, he did promise to work on his views and he had a reasonable explanation."

"Oh?" Daphne asked icily, a view that Tracey and Blaise shared, based on their expressions.

"I'm not saying I agree, just that I understand." She nodded. "Ron said that it was a long-standing view, although he could not say who taught it to him." He heard Ginny snort. "But more importantly, he was viewing all Slytherin through the example of Draco Malfoy, the most visible and prominent Slytherin to most of us Gryffindors, although Snape did not help your reputation either."

"The bastard!" Blaise exclaimed. Ginny looked angry until he quickly said, "We never should have let Malfoy have the big head he did. We should have put him in his place in our first year."

"Easier said than done," Tracey commented. "If you remember, his father was very powerful back then, and by the time he wasn't, Draco was a force to be reckoned with himself. We can only hope that things will get better now that he's gone."

"Well, I certainly enjoyed school a lot more after he was gone last year," Harry said with a smile.

Blaise smiled too. "So did all of Slytherin house. He really did drag our whole house down."

"Uh, can I ask a question?" Ginny asked timidly. Everyone nodded at her. "What is the reaction in your house to Snape being gone?"

The three Slytherins looked at each other, each daring one of the others to answer.

"Fine, I'll answer," Daphne eventually said. "Snape is a subject you're better off not asking anyone else about. In Slytherin, we stick up for each other because we've always had to, because no one else will. That's why most of us liked Snape to at least some degree. Of course, most of us also disliked him because his actions made the rest of the school hate us." At Ginny's raised eyebrow, Daphne chuckled. "Yes, we were aware of what his actions meant to us. While I will miss his class, as he was brilliant with Potions, I personally think we're better off with him gone."

Ginny and Harry looked at the other two.

Tracey nodded. Blaise said, "I essentially agree. However, I will add that a lot of the problem can be laid at Dumbledore's feet. He really did allow too much to happen. Of course, Snape wasn't very Slytherin in his actions many times either. Ginny, I find your brother's views inexcusable, but with nearly 6 years of Malfoy and Snape acting like they did, I can understand why he held them. Wherever Ron got his views from, Hogwarts didn't help him, but reinforced those bad views."

"Thanks, Blaise," Ginny quietly said.

Harry was quite pleased that Ginny was getting along with Daphne and her friends. He wished everyone could. Then he saw her looking at him and remembered her request. "You said you wanted to talk to me about something?"

The redhead gave him a big grin. "Well, part of it was I just wanted to gossip with Daphne about you."

He groaned as he looked at his wife. She gave him an evil smirk, which just made everything worse. As he glanced upward, as if for help, everyone laughed at him.

"I also wanted to tell you congratulations, Harry."

He looked at her and saw that Ginny was very serious now.

"You've had it rough, Harry, and I know there's a lot about you that I don't know; but what I do know, I wouldn't wish on anyone. So to see you find someone who makes you happy, well, I'm very happy for you." Ginny ended on a pleasant smile, which warmed Harry's heart.

"Thank you, Ginny. I -- we -- appreciate it."

She chuckled and looked at Daphne. "Still training him on thinking of you and him as a couple?"

Daphne nodded with a knowing look. "He's getting better, but it still slips out occasionally."

"I am here, you know," Harry complained. They all laughed at him.

"I also wanted to congratulate you on your handling of Mum. I don't think I've ever seen anyone shut down one of her rants. It was brilliantly done." Ginny gave him a mock bow.

He chuckled. "I'd love to take the credit for that, but Daphne helped me figure out how to deal with her. I really do love your mum, but," Harry looked at Ginny, "sorry no insult intended..."

"None taken," Ginny told him breezily.

"But that woman is difficult to be around at times. I do love her, but she can be her own worst enemy."

Daphne looked at him at if in thought. "You once mentioned there were certain negatives, and one big one..."

Harry did his best not to react for Ginny's sake, hoping the girl would not think they were talking about her. "You understand Mrs Weasley, then." Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Ginny did not get angry and he was glad she had misunderstood the subject of Daphne's comment.

"As do you, since you handled it so well, my love," Daphne graced him with a smile, one that showed a lot of love. There was silence for several long seconds while the two lovers gazed at each other.

"If you'll excuse me," Ginny said, breaking the moment, "I'll go find my other friends. Later!" She seemed to waltz out in a good mood.

"She really is a nice person," Blaise commented. Tracey shot him a look that Harry thought looked like jealousy.

Harry smiled. "She is. Once she's your friend, she'll guard your back as if it were her own. I also hear she's not dating anyone at the moment." He looked at Blaise, who only smiled.

"Not interested. I have someone else in mind at the moment." He glanced at Tracey, who caught his eyes. She relaxed again.

"So, will you be staying with me or with Harry?" Tracey asked. "I assume you have a contract? The article in the Prophet hinted that you did."

"We do and I'll be with Harry," Daphne said with a smile. "Although, I will come visit you both in the common room."

"You better," Tracey said challengingly, even if she was smiling.

The four talked for the rest of the ride. Harry found it quite enjoyable, especially with no insulting visit from Malfoy.

The Welcoming Feast was a combination of the usual and the strange. It had the same format and rhythm as always, but the change in players took some getting used to. McGonagall ran the show now, and Flitwick handled the Sorting. There were also three new teachers at the head table, but that was mostly expected. The surprise was Slughorn was gone.

Another surprise was the size of the group of first-years was also quite a bit bigger than previous years. For his memory of the previous six years, each had about forty or so new students. This year, Harry counted fifty-eight. He assumed that no war made a difference.

The Feast itself was fairly normal. The food was good and Ron still ate like a pig, or a vacuum, depending on which world one was raised in. Harry wondered if he should mention to his friend that that bad habit was one of the things getting in the way of Hermione liking him. To Harry's good fortune, Daphne sat with him at the Gryffindor table, although that caused a lot of looks and some murmurs.

As the Feast drew to a close, McGonagall stood up for the announcements. "May I have your attention please? The returning students know the rules, but for you first years and a few who seem

to forget. The Forbidden Forest is off-limits, as its name implies, and there should be no magic done in the corridors. Now that the war is over..."

There was applause and many looked Harry's way. He bore it as best he could.

"Yes, thank you, Mr Potter." She nodded royally towards him. "Because the war is over, third years and up may have a Hogsmeade visit once a month." That drew more applause.

"My most important announcement is to introduce our new staff. On my left is Professor William O'Shay. He is a retired Auror and will be our Defense Against the Dark Arts Teacher, and also the Head of Slytherin House." There was polite applause. Harry thought him to be about the age of Moody, although without Moody's scars.

"On my right is Professor Mary O'Neill. She will be our Transfiguration Teacher and Head of Gryffindor House." While Harry applauded like everyone else, he also wondered if she was related to Professor McGonagall, maybe a niece or something. There was a slight resemblance.

"Finally, on the far right is Professor Suzanne Bentley. She will be our new Potions teacher. I'm sure you'll easily notice her accent, which comes to us from America." Harry wondered about her while he clapped. Harry thought Slughorn would have stayed, but with Dumbledore gone, apparently not.

"My last announcement is really a request to everyone here. Mr Potter and Miss Greengrass are the only students here under an active Marriage Contract." A few murmurs arose, so McGonagall raised her voice. "As such," it went quiet again, "they, and only they, are exempt from the rule of boy and a girl occupying the same bedroom. I point this out to spare them any rumors and from having to answer the same question four hundred times. Feel free to congratulate them on their joining. Breakfast starts at seven; be here to get your timetables. Prefects, please help the first-years. Have a good-night."

The noise rose as everyone started talking. Harry had a question for Daphne, but it was going to have to wait, as they were surrounded by people, most of whom were congratulating them. Hermione hung back and waited for them, so when all the well-wishers were finished, the three of them walked to their new quarters.

It was centrally located, which meant they only had a short walk from the Great Hall. Through the wonder of magic, there was a door in their common room that led to an area near each of the houses, so they could get there quickly if required. Their common room also had a table that could seat eight, for tutoring or large projects, and a fireplace and a couple of couches and chairs. There was also a miniature version of the prefect's bathroom. It was quite nice.

Off of that were two rooms, one for the Head Boy and one for the Head Girl. They were marked. Harry was pleased to find that his was larger and had an extra wardrobe cabinet in it. Each room also had its own toilet. All three of them were quite pleased with the arrangements.

"Daphne, could I ask you a question?"

The Potters turned to look at Hermione and Daphne nodded. "Would it be possible to see your marriage contract? I did some research on them, but I'd like to see a real one if possible."

The blonde smiled. "I understand, Hermione, but I'm sorry. It is available only to those of the Houses who have signed. For example, in theory, I could ask to see the one for my sister because I come from the House of Greengrass, who is a signer for it. However, Harry could not, as he is of the House of Potter, even if he is my husband. The Old Laws may seem unusual to you, but they usually have a good reason for being the way they are."

Hermione seemed disappointed, but she acknowledged the answer with a nod.

"My turn," Harry quipped.

Hermione looked surprised that he had a question, while Daphne just gave him a smirk, knowing that she would be educating him on the Old Laws for a long time to come.

"Why did McGonagall say that we were the only ones with an active contract?"

Daphne laughed, which annoyed Harry a little. Most of his annoyance dissipated as he watched her, since her laughing was pleasant to hear and it caused her chest to bounce, which he always enjoyed watching. "Harry, you didn't stop to think that through, did you?" He shook his head. "Hermione?"

"Harry, it's really quite simple," his ever-knowledgeable friend started in her usual lecture tone. "It is said that many marriage contracts are created between minors who are too young to be married. Therefore, they have a clause in them, which while legally binding, makes them inactive until the minors have grown up. That age is usually eighteen or nineteen to give them time to finish Hogwarts." She now looked at Daphne. "So why didn't yours have a delay in it?"

"Because," she looked at Harry with that sultry smile that made him want to hurry her to their bedroom, "we were both already legally adults, and I wanted him now. So I convinced Father not to put that clause in. Harry had been so noble over the summer, despite my wiles, I felt it was good payback, even if it was only for a few months."

Harry was floored. "You ... you witch!" Then he started laughing and Daphne joined him. Hermione smiled, but she did not laugh.

"That really wasn't very nice," Hermione commented when they stopped their laughter.

"Perhaps not," Daphne said with a sly smile, "but then again, I think we both are enjoying the fruits of my planning." She gave him another sultry smile.

This time, Harry did not resist. "I think that's enough talk for tonight." He grabbed Daphne's hand and pulled her towards their bedroom. "Good-night, Hermione."

"Yes, good-night, Hermione," Daphne called through her chuckle.

"Night, you two." Hermione stared after them shaking her head. Their door slammed and she heard Harry say, "You minx!" followed by laughter from Daphne, which was suddenly cut off.

As she went to her own room, Hermione thought, "Thank Merlin for silencing spells."

Classes started the next day and they seemed to go reasonably well, or so Harry thought at first. He was a bit put out that their "marriage privileges", as he thought of them, did not extend to the classroom. They were allowed to do many things together, including sitting at either the Gryffindor or the Slytherin table for meals, but when attending class, they still went with their individual house. They sat together in Potions and in Defense, but those were the only two classes the seventh year Gryffindors and Slytherins had together, at least for the classes the couple both took.

It looked like it would be a good season for the Gryffindor Quidditch team. Harry was still captain and he only had one player to replace, a Chaser position since Katie Bell had left at the end of last year. He decided to make Ginny assistant captain, to give her some experience for next year, and to off-load some work because he had so little free time. He also decided to recruit some extra players, as a reserve in case someone got sick this year at the time of a game, and to give Ginny some more experienced players next year, when he and Ron left.

Except for the occasional strange looks from Theo Nott, Harry thought school was going very well. When Harry mentioned Theo and his behavior to Tracey and Blaise, they could come up with no reason for Nott's behavior, other than to say that he seemed more quiet this year, so Harry shrugged it off.

At the end of the second week, Harry and Hermione were finishing their short weekly meeting with the Headmaster when McGonagall said, "Mr Potter, if you would stay for a moment, I have a small matter that I'd like you to help me with." Harry had no idea what she needed.

Hermione said, "I'll tell Daphne you'll be delayed," as she left.

"Mr Potter, I know that you have not been very forthcoming in regard to your last encounter with Voldemort, but there is something I need to know, in that it relates to a problem I have."

Harry was unsure where this was going to go, as he knew of no loose ends. "If I can," he said vaguely.

She nodded. "You see, I have several boxes of personal affects for Severus Snape, and I was wondering if perhaps Voldemort might have said anything during your last encounter that might indicate if I should store these for when Severus returns, or if I should forward them to a relative."

He ran through his Occlumency routine for a couple of seconds, while he appeared to think. He was going to have to walk a fine line here. "Well, Snape was not a topic of conversation when we fought," McGonagall smiled every so slightly, "but now that you make me think about it, I now recall him saying something to effect of 'Snape will never make that mistake again'. I had assumed he meant with a potion that had been requested, but whatever the topic, that's the only clue I have for you. Unfortunately, that can be taken at least a couple of ways."

"I see. You do have a point. It could mean that Severus has learned a lesson, or that he wasn't alive to repeat the mistake," she theorized.

"It might also mean that he was punished in some way that he won't make the mistake again, perhaps punished enough that he'll never do anything again, although he's alive," Harry added.

McGonagall sighed. "You are correct, but none of this answers my question." She considered it for a moment more. "Mr Potter, based on his tone and any other non-verbal clues, what is your best guess as to the meaning?"

Harry had not completely decided what to do about Snape, but his inclination was to leave him in the cave. "It's tough to say, Professor,

but if I were in your shoes, I would forward his affects. He hasn't been seen for over two months. If he should return, you can always tell him where you sent his things."

"Perhaps that would be for the best." McGonagall looked like something was bothering her. The expression turned into another question. "Mr Potter, did you last fight Voldemort before or after Professor Snape disappeared?"

Now this was a sticky wicket indeed. "To be honest, I don't know, Professor." Knowing her next question, he added, "It would have been about the same time, or least during the same weekend." He decided he needed to go with the truth here, so as to keep his story straight.

McGonagall jerked up in her chair. "Mr Potter, that was during the school year. Are you telling me that you left school grounds for this encounter?"

He wanted to hit his head on the desk in front of him for not seeing that coming. With a weak smile, he said, "Er, yes, but Professor Dumbledore and I had discussions about it and we had gone on trips throughout the year for that sort of thing." It was only one, but several sounded better and she could not ask Dumbledore, could she? "So when the opportunity arose, I took it to investigate. If I didn't have an ideal situation, I would have simply left; but the situation was nearly ideal, so I took it and got lucky. Professor, if I had not done so, there's no telling how many more people would have died."

The older witch looked upset, but she finally said, "I am not happy to hear this story, Mr Potter, but I can't fault your logic. However, this raises another question in my mind." He mentally cringed. "Professor Dumbledore explicitly asked if you knew anything about Severus's location, and you said no. If so, how do you explain your statement and how did you know where Voldemort was to go fight him?"

Damn! He had goofed again. He thought fast and decided to go with the lesser of two lies and some truth. "I did have a vision as to where he was, and it was a true vision." Her eyes narrowed. "Yes, Professor, I withheld information from Professor Dumbledore."

Her eyes went wide at the confession. “But why?” she asked in a slightly stunned voice, as if unable to believe that he would have lied to Dumbledore of all people.

“First of all, because I would have had to endure a guilt trip about leaving the school grounds without him. Before, he always wanted to be there to hold my hand, so to speak, without really doing anything useful and I was getting tired of it. Second, it wouldn’t have helped him any.”

“You don’t know that, Mr Potter. It may have confirmed something else only he knew and that could have helped Severus.”

“And you have all but named the third reason, Professor. Professor Dumbledore, in all of his knowledge, made a great many mistakes with me, some of which will take me a long time to forgive him.” She was taken aback by the forcefulness of his statement. “The worst mistake he repeatedly made was withholding information that I should have known. Maybe it was childish of me, but I was merely returning the favor. My only regret is that he did not find out that I purposefully did it.”

“Mr Potter,” she drawled, full of disappointment of him and yet anguish for him.

“I know, Professor, we all make mistakes, including Professor Dumbledore, but some of his were so large, so far reaching, I have no regret in what I did. Although, seeing what he did to me does help me to understand the saying, ‘with great power comes great responsibility’.”

McGonagall gazed at him for a moment. “I wondered if there was another, an unspoken, reason for your refusal to speak at his funeral.”

“I do not think very highly of Dumbledore at the moment. I recognize his knowledge and power, but I also know he was not nearly as wise as everyone makes him out to be.”

"Should you ever find yourself in a similar position, Mr Potter, I hope you remember those words," she gently told him.

"I understand, Professor. However, there is a very important difference between Dumbledore and myself. I have Daphne to keep me well grounded; Dumbledore had no one, and so he made himself more than he was."

McGonagall contemplated that for a few seconds. "I'm not sure I agree, Mr Potter, but I can see why you might say that."

"That is not me alone, that's after Daphne and I have spent long hours talking about it, as she has tried to help me get past the mistakes and forgive him. She is also the most insightful person I know when it comes to understanding people, so if she believes it to be true, it probably is."

McGonagall turned her contemplative look to him now. "Mr Potter, I will make you an offer that I would probably extend to no other due to confidentialities. But if you would like to discuss some of these things in more detail, I would be willing. I can give you some insight into Albus Dumbledore that you would not find anywhere else, and I can give you more information on some of the circumstances surrounding you. I will not claim to be an expert in either area, but perhaps I can help you lay some of your doubts to rest."

Harry was very moved by her offer. "Thank you, Professor, I may take you up on that some day."

"You're very welcome, Mr Potter. At this time, I would recommend that you go find your 'intended'. I believe she might help soothe you after this less than pleasant discussion."

A smile lit his face for the first time in the conversation. "A brilliant idea, Professor. Thanks." This was manipulation that he did not mind.

McGonagall watched the young man leave with a spring in his step. Miss Greengrass was definitely good for him.

"Albus, I assume you heard that?"

"Yes, and I am very saddened by it," an out of the way portrait said.

"As you should be," she said with no forgiveness in her tone. "I can guess at some of his complaints, and the first is one I tried to help you to avoid, but you refused to listen to me, which validates one of his other complaints."

"I made many mistakes with young Harry, but I was not aware they had hurt him so deeply. He was always so resilient."

"Fortunately, he still is," she said as she got up to deal with Severus Snape's affects. She wondered if Harry knew exactly where Snape was but was not saying. Considering their relationship, or really how much Snape liked to torment Harry, she would not be surprised what Harry might have done or not done regarding Snape. Truth was, she really would not blame him either, which was why she did not directly ask if he had done anything to Severus. If she did not know, she did not have to do anything.

As the year continued, Harry thought life was going pretty well.

On the home front, he, Daphne, and Hermione got along well. It was also not uncommon for small groups of students to meet in their common room in the early evening after dinner to study. Neville was one of the most frequent visitors and Harry enjoyed that. Harry had made sure that Ron knew he was welcome and came from time to time. The fact that Tracey and Blaise were often there meant that Ron had to be around Slytherins if he was to spend any time with Harry outside of Quidditch or classes.

Quidditch had been going well too. The Gryffindor team won their first match against Hufflepuff, although it was by a narrow margin. Their beaters were so weak, Harry would have given a lot to have Fred and George Weasley back in those positions. He and Ginny discussed the problem multiple times and she did not have any better ideas.

Ginny was still his good friend, and in many ways, becoming a better one. Harry did not understand that, but he just took it as it came. The redhead spent a number of evenings in his and Hermione's common

rooms. She talked Quidditch with Harry, got tutoring from Hermione when needed, and seemed to like to discuss “girl things” with Daphne and Tracey. During those times, Harry was grateful for Neville’s usual presence.

One night after everyone had left and it was just he and Daphne in their bedroom, he decided to ask his wife’s opinion. “Daph? What’s your opinion of Ginny? She’s, well, I don’t understand what’s happening with her. She’s always around, which I don’t mind as I think of her as a friend. You don’t seem to mind or feel threatened by her, which is nice. I just don’t know what to make of her.”

Daphne stopped putting her clean clothes away that the elves had returned and smiled at him. “You really don’t understand?” He shook his head, causing her to chuckle as she returned to her work. “It’s really quite simple, Harry; in simplistic terms she’s using us.”

“What?!” That was not something he would ever have thought Ginny would do.

“Oh hush, Harry, it’s not quite what you’re thinking.”

“Then please explain it to me, I’m all ears.” He gave her his undivided attention, sure this had to be good.

“It’s all a matter of perspective and degree, Harry. In fact, one could say that in most relationships, there is ‘using’ going on. In this case, I think Ginny is hanging around us to build up her self-esteem, in addition to getting practical things done, like homework or talking Quidditch with you.”

Harry was still confused. “Why would she need to do that? She a wonderful person and has come a long way. At sixteen, she’s pretty well grown up.”

Daphne finished with the last of her laundered robes and came over to sit by Harry. “You see her that way, but she does not. Now that you’ve told me about her first year, I can understand her point of view. That was a lot harder on her than you think. Harry, much of her social or public life has been spent trying to recover from that, whether it

was trying to have friends or chasing boys or like now, trying to find her place in society.”

“I know that she didn’t have many friends in her first year, but what do you mean about chasing boys?”

She rolled her eyes. “You are so blind, sometimes.” He glared at her. “Harry, she had a crush on you, like many girls of this generation, so her chasing after you, Michael, and Dean were all ways for her to explore who she was as a girl changing into a woman. She wanted you, her knight in shining armor, but dated the others while she waited on you to notice her. When you passed her by, that hurt her, not that you did that intentionally, but it did. So she’s trying to spend some time around you anyway to make sure that she’s still acceptable, to see if you notice her. By being friendly and spending time with her, it’s helping her to see that you did not reject her because you don’t like her as a person, but just because, like you said, the timing didn’t work out.”

He struggled with that for a moment. “You make it sound like she’s trying to live in a fantasy world to feel better.”

“I don’t know that I’d put it that way, but perhaps that’s true on some level. I don’t mind because I know nothing serious will happen. I have you and I know you love me. Therefore, I’m secure. I’ve also found out that she’s a nice person and I like spending time around her too. Plus,” a slightly evil grin came over her, “with her so near, I can more easily keep an eye on her.”

Harry chuckled. “Keep your friends close and your enemies closer?” She only continued to grin at him. “OK, you also said that she’s trying to find her place in society. What did you mean about that?”

“You do know that she’s from a Pureblood family, right?”

“I suppose, although I’ve never really given it much thought,” he admitted.

“She is, and the fact that she’s a girl, means that she if she is going to fit into our current society, that she’s going to have to work to find her

place, especially since her father will not create a marriage contract for her like my father did for me. Ironically, watching you, who's making a transition such as you are, makes her notice this even more. So by hanging around us, she can use us to see what she might want to do one day."

"That doesn't sound so bad."

"No, but she's also trying to use our fame to help herself, like 'I'm a friend of Harry Potter'."

He frowned. "I never thought she would do that too." He hated people who did it.

"Honestly, I don't think she's doing it purposefully, so don't get upset. Or if she is, it's in a very mild way. I mean, all of your friends can drop that line at parties or in conversations to crack open a door and not really hurt you. It will be interesting to see what she does with it in the future. I think she's a good enough friend not to try and hurt you on purpose. For now, I'd tell you to just be your normal self and not worry about it," Daphne advised.

Harry shook his head. "I hate my fame."

"I understand, Harry. It's something we'll have to deal with, as it will mean we won't have a lot of privacy or anonymity in public. On the other hand, it is a useful tool at times." She fixed him with her sultry look, the one that melted his will. "Now, strip off your clothes and come join me in bed. I have a little extra energy to get rid of before I go to sleep."

His mood took an upswing, leaving problems behind. "Yes, dear," he happily said.

((A/N: Just one more chapter left.))

Chapter 8

Classes continued and Harry thought the new teachers were working out well, particularly Professor O'Shay in Defense. The professor always seemed to have a little something extra for Harry, some little challenge to stretch him. Sometimes it was a new spell, other times it was the new use of an old spell or even just a new look at old information. Of course, everyone in the class benefitted as well, but it was obvious the professor did this for Harry, as some of the spells required so much power to cast, that he was the only one who could perform them.

After one Defense class in late October, Harry, Hermione, and Ron were walking towards the Headmaster's office. Harry and Hermione had a meeting, while Ron was just killing time for a few minutes.

"Ron, I haven't heard any negative thoughts about Slytherins lately. Have you come to a new decision about them?" Harry knew it was not totally fair to ask that in front of Hermione, but she knew about the issue and they all were good friends, so he was not really concerned.

His friend got a nervous look. "I uh, I haven't said anything like you asked, Harry. I thought it was a good idea, you know, live and let live. They've been pretty good about leaving me alone too."

"That's good to hear." Harry appreciated that Hermione was not asking questions at the moment. "But what do you think about them?"

Ron shifted the book bag on his shoulder. "Like I said, they've been decent, and that's been a surprise," he finally said. "Look, there's the gargoyle. I guess we'll have to finish this later. A little more time wouldn't hurt either," he said, not able to look Harry in the eye.

Harry sighed, not fully understanding what was taking Ron so long. "OK, as you wish. Come on, Hermione. Kilts and drums." The gargoyle moved at the password and the 'Head Couple' walked up.

"I'm sure he'll eventually do the right thing, Harry," Hermione softly said when they were alone at the top of the stairs.

He nodded. "Eventually is the key word there, but as the saying goes, time waits for no man."

"What do you mean by that?" she asked curiously.

"That there are deadlines for some things." He knocked and they were called to enter. Hermione was still trying to figure him out as they entered the office.

It was the last Saturday in November and Christmas break was coming soon. A wedding was coming soon too. Daphne had left that morning to go visit Tracey to prepare for the wedding, as Tracey was helping her finalize the last of the plans. Ron had come to see Harry, hoping to go flying before Quidditch practice, but Harry had a wedding detail to finalize as well.

"Ron, I'm glad you're here early," Harry told him with a smile.

"I thought we might fly for a few minutes before practice. I know you've been busy and well, it could be fun too."

"It could," Harry agreed, but not enthusiastically. "However, we should probably talk about something first."

"Oh, what?" Ron looked a little shifty, as if he had an idea and wanted to avoid it.

"Ron, I need to know what you're going to do about Daphne." Ron did not say anything. "There is about a month until the wedding and I've got to know whether we're still just friends or if we'll be best friends. You see, we're each going to have three people standing up with us at the wedding and I've got one position left to fill. The deadline has come for me to fill it, and I'll either ask a best friend or a best friend of the family. I wanted to give you the first shot."

He grinned. "Thanks, Harry, I'd love to."

"Not so fast, Ron." Harry was not grinning. "I said I'd give it to a best friend and you're not there." Ron hung his head. "Look Ron, we can stay as we are if that's what you really want, but if you really want it to

go back to the way it was between us, you have a task to do before the end of this weekend. If not, I'll ask Remus to join me at the front in the wedding."

Ron leaned back in his chair and ran a hand through his hair. Harry just waited, saying nothing.

"Who else will be in it?" Ron asked, finally breaking the silence.

"Neville will be my best man and Blaise will be up there too."

"So I'd have to stand next to Blaise?"

"Yeah, would that really be so hard? You've spent several evenings in here sitting next to him. He didn't bite then."

Ron snorted. "No, no teeth marks." He sighed. "I sat next to him just to see what would happen."

"And?" Harry prompted.

"And I lived. Damn it, Harry! Look, I know in my head that they're all right, or at least some of them are, but I just don't feel it. I'll even tell you that Daphne is a wonderful girl, but I'll also tell you that I think someone else would be better for you."

Harry groaned. "Don't even start on how Ginny would be better for me."

"No, I've given up on that. She's made it very clear that she's happy as she is for now. I just ... I just feel like I'll be losing part of myself to give that belief up. Does that make sense?"

"A little. I've been having to learn to forgive Dumbledore and losing those parts of me have been hard, but I think it's also made me a better person. Are you saying you don't want to change and get better?" Harry asked.

"How do I know it's for the better?" Ron rhetorically asked, but Harry kept quiet. "Fine, I'll apologize to Daphne..."

"And me."

"And you," Ron agreed, "tomorrow evening after dinner. Give me just that much longer."

Harry smiled. "It'll be good to have you back, Ron."

"It'll be good to be back, but you make it bloody hard."

Harry laughed. "Yeah, growing up is hard. Anyway, come on, we need to get to Quidditch practice." Ron smiled, happy to be back on more familiar ground, and the two walked outside to have some fun while working hard.

Daphne had left Harry after breakfast to take care of what she hoped was the last of her major wedding plans. First, she had gone to the library to find a couple books on Pureblood traditions, as she felt she was missing something. That had taken her longer than she had thought, but she finally had found what she was looking for.

That done, she headed off for the Slytherin common room, where she was to meet Tracey to go over the wedding plans. Even though her sister, Astoria, was to be her Matron of Honor, Daphne was leaning heavily on Tracey since she was nearby and easier to communicate with. Daphne was getting concerned about Astoria, as her sister was starting to write less than she used to.

She was so caught up in thought that she missed the sound of a door opening behind her. It was with survival reflexes that she dodged when she heard someone whisper a stunning spell behind her. Whipping her wand out and turning, she again had to jump to avoid another stunning spell from Theo Nott. As she started to cast her own spell, a hex hit in the back and her wand when flying backward. Looking over her shoulder, she saw Pansy Parkinson catch her wand.

"You're later than I expected, but it's still good of you to join me," Nott told her. "Come into this room, we need to have a chat." He motioned her with his wand.

Not having a choice, she slowly moved, trying to anticipate what might be coming, and not liking most of the choices.

Inside, Nott moved her to the middle of the unused classroom and Pansy walked in too, dropping Daphne's wand just inside the door. "There, I've helped you and my debt is repaid."

A scowl came over Nott, but he nodded. "It is repaid as long as you speak of this to no one." Pansy silently left, closing the door behind her.

"What do you want, Nott?" If she could figure out what was going on, maybe she could do something useful.

A look between a leer and a sneer came over him. "I want you to help me hurt Potter."

She almost laughed at the absurd statement. "Why?"

"Because Potter hurt me. I know Potter killed my father and I think you helped him."

Now she laughed, which was a mistake because it made Nott angrier, but she could not take the reaction back now. "Sorry, Nott, but that's ludicrous. If that were true and Ministry could prove it, I suspect Harry would be in Azkaban right now."

"You have a point that the Ministry can't prove it, but I know it's true."

"How?" The doubt she had was very small, but perhaps they did overlook something.

"Because he's the only one with motive and the power. I don't know he did it, because father checks all of his mail very carefully, but the house-elf saw him disappear after reading a letter. Somehow, Potter disguised a Portkey in a letter and sent father away to be murdered."

Daphne hid her relief. "Besides the fact that you're only speculating, it's easily proved we were not even in the country at the time that happened. We had already left and were in Rome."

Theo grinned manically. "Doesn't matter, mail can be sent from anywhere. Now, we're going to have a little fun, and then you and I are going to go on a trip. Don't worry, though," he said said happily, "I won't kill you, although you might wish you were dead by this time next week."

"Why, what are you going to do?" she was getting worried, although she did her best not to show it.

"Like I said, I'm going to have some fun with you, just like Potter has been, then we're going go to Knockturn Alley, where, with some help from a spell, you will prostitute yourself. After you're been used for a while, I'm sure you'll be found by someone who will report your whereabouts. The real question is, will Potter still want you after that?" He laughed cruelly.

It was all Daphne could do to keep her even expression, not to mention restraining herself from attacking him where he stood. The fact that his wand was pointed at her and the distance was too great stopped her. At least he had not tied her up. That gave her an idea. If she could get them close enough together, perhaps she could do what she would have done to Malfoy had Harry not helped.

Using her Occlumency to shove all of her revulsion away and to play the part of a lifetime, she looked at him with resignation and slight smile. "Very well, Theo. Since I have no choice," she started to unbutton her robes, "come and get it. Show me what you're made of. If you're good enough, I'll make sure you enjoy this like never before. I'll do anything you want." She had no idea what Nott's experience was, but she did her best to play to his ego.

Nott got a smile on his face. "Anything?"

"Anything, Theo." She adapted the sultry look that she knew Harry loved so much, ignoring the anguish of having to do that for someone

else. She dropped her robes, revealing a thin blouse and short shirt underneath. Letting him look for a few seconds, she started to unbutton her blouse and take very slow steps towards him. "I can make you feel very good, Theo. When my hands run over your skin -- tantalizing you -- you'll be in heaven." She winked at him and obviously glanced at his crotch. Looking back up at his face, she saw him run his eyes over her body. She was sure that in his mind, she was already undressed.

He started to take his robes off too. Unfortunately, it was only with one hand; his wand was still aimed at her.

"That's it, take those things off and let me show you just how good I can make you feel." She continued her slow glide. There was about six feet of the original ten feet between them left.

Nott hurriedly undressed, practically ripping his robes. He fumbled trying to take his pants off as he could not take his eyes off of her.

Daphne dropped her blouse, her breasts covered only by a bra, and started unzipping her skirt. "Tell me, Theo, have you ever had any fantasies about me?"

"Oh yeah," he said huskily, dropping his pants, pulling his feet out and leaving his boxers slightly pulled down in his haste. He yanked at his shirt, popping most of the buttons, something easily repaired later. He moved his wand to his other hand to keep it trained on her as he finished disrobing.

"Good," she told him delightedly, "that will make things so much better." As her feet came together in her glide, she dropped her skirt, then continued her slow glide over in just her bra and knickers, both lacey and covering little.

Nott seemed to hyper-ventilate as he watched her approach, his eyes practically glued to her chest.

Daphne stepped up to him and lightly put both of her hands on his chest, caressing it for a few seconds. He groaned. "How about a kiss for luck to start this off?" she asked invitingly, almost purring.

He leaned towards her, pressing his chest against hers, while she slid her left hand up to his shoulder and her right hand up to his neck and into his hair to pull him closer.

Just before their lips met, Theo closed his eyes for the kiss and Daphne slid her right hand forward around to his face and with all of her strength, jabbed her thumb into his eye, her long fingernail easily tearing through the soft eyelid and the thumb going in past the first knuckle. As Nott started to scream, her left hand was already moving out along his arm.

"You bitch!" he screamed in his pain, his left hand feebly trying to pull her arm away as he stepped away from her.

Daphne moved with him and did not remove her thumb, but pressed harder. Her left hand found his wand and easily yanked it from him.

"How dare you try to hurt my Harry!" she screamed as her arm came around and she used the wand like a dagger, shoving half of it through his other eye and shoving him backwards away from her. She watched him scream one last time and hit the floor hard, convulsing once and then going silent. "You sick bastard!" she screamed at him, her emotions coming loose. Giving in, she kicked him hard between the legs, but he did not move.

As her emotions took hold of her and all the "what ifs" hit her, she stumbled over towards the door and leaned against the wall, letting herself down slowly, feeling the rough stone scrape her back until she was sitting. A shaking hand picked up her wand and she began to sob.

After what seemed like forever, but was really only about ten minutes or so, Daphne started to pull herself together, concentrating on the fact that nothing really had happened to her or Harry. Sure, Nott had seen her practically naked, but then again, he would never share that with anyone else.

Slowly standing up, she felt the scratches on her back, but they were not too painful. Looking at herself, she saw a little blood on her,

especially her right hand. Shifting her wand, she very carefully did a light cleaning spell, feeling the sting on her skin. Now that she was physically clean, she walked over, picked up her clothes, and got dressed again, ignoring the stinging on her back. She did her best to avoid looking at Nott's body. Straightening her robes, with her wand in hand, she left the room, locking it behind her.

With rage to give her energy, she angrily strode to the Slytherin common room. Going in, she looked around. In the corner at a table was Pansy Parkinson. Without hesitation, she cast a banishing charm at the girl, taking her completely unaware. The girl was flung backwards into the wall, hitting with a very audible thud, and fell to the floor unconscious. Amongst all the gasps, Daphne walked over and removed Pansy's wand, bound her in ropes, and started walking with the bound girl levitated in front of her. Daphne ignored all questions and left the common room. She did not fail to notice one of the fifth year prefects running out the door behind her towards O'Shay's quarters to get their head of house, or so she assumed. Daphne did not care; she was headed towards the Headmaster's office.

Harry always knew the password and he always shared, so it was trivial for her to get passed the gargoyle. Pansy bumped into a lot of the stairs and corners on the way, but Daphne could have cared less as some of it had been purposeful. In fact, when she reached the office door, she used Pansy's head to knock, almost like a battering ram.

"Please come in!" came through the door.

Reaching over, Daphne opened the door and pushed her prisoner through. In front of a wide-eyed Professor McGonagall, she dropped Pansy in the middle of the floor.

"Miss Greengrass! What is the meaning of this?!"

"This ...", she had to work hard not to say 'bitch', "person ... helped Theo Nott kidnap and assault me!"

McGonagall stared at her and then the girl on the floor, partially unable to believe this was happening. She was brought out of her swirling thoughts by her door slamming open to reveal a very concerned and powerful looking Harry Potter with his wand in his hand.

Harry and Ron were returning after practice, and a good one Harry had thought. The Ravenclaw team had beat Slytherin in the last game and he thought they would be tough to win against. They were turning a corner near his room, when he was practically bowled over by Professor O'Shay.

"Potter! How fortunate. Give that broom to Weasley and come with me immediately." He did not wait for Harry, but quickly walked off.

Harry was not sure what was going on, but O'Shay looked serious. So he handed his Firebolt to a surprised looking Ron and raced off after the professor, slowing back down to a fast walk when he caught up. "What's happened, Professor?" Harry could not fail to notice that they were headed in the direction of the Headmaster's office.

"I'm not entirely sure, Mr Potter, and what I've been told makes no sense." He glanced at Harry as if evaluating him. "I've been told that Miss Greengrass marched into the common room and blasted Miss Parkinson against the wall, tied her up, and then left in this direction. She also refused to answer all questions posed to her."

Harry thought about and could only come to one conclusion, especially since Tracey had said that Pansy had been spending more time around Theo, who was still acting strange. Without a word, Harry took off running again. He shouted the password at the gargoyle from down the corridor, allowing it to move before he got there and allowing him to sprint up the stairs without breaking stride. At the top, he pulled out his wand and flung the door open. Sure enough, there was his intended and a tied up Parkinson on the floor.

"Mr Potter!" McGonagall called out firmly. "You will kindly act in a civilized manner with regard to my door."

Harry rushed to Daphne and pulled her into a hug, which she willingly returned. "My apologies, Professor," he mumbled as he felt his heart start to calm at seeing that Daphne was all right. As he caressed her back, he felt her stiffen. Pulling back, he carefully surveyed her face. "What's wrong? Why is your back hurt?"

"My own stupidity," she said through clinched teeth.

O'Shay took that moment to walk in. He scowled as he saw one of students on the floor.

"Professor, if you'll close the door, we'll get to the bottom of this," McGonagall requested. O'Shay complied.

"How much are you injured, Miss Greengrass? Do I need to have Madam Pomfrey come immediately?"

"No, Professor McGonagall, it's just a few scratches from when I slid down the wall. It will wait."

"Very well, then. Please have a seat and tell me what happened?"

Daphne put her wand up and sat in a chair. Harry enlarged the chair lengthwise into a small sofa and joined her. McGonagall went behind her desk and O'Shay took another chair. No one did a thing about the unconscious tied-up girl on the floor.

"I was heading to our," Daphne looked at O'Shay, "common room to talk to Tracey. From behind me, Nott came out of somewhere and shot a spell at me, a Stunning spell, I believe. I barely managed to dodge it. When I turned to confront him, Parkinson stepped out of somewhere hidden and hit me with a Disarming spell and took my wand. Nott took us into an unused classroom. Parkinson dropped my wand in there and said that her debt was repaid and left, closing and locking the door behind her."

She felt Harry take her hand in his, and she noted his concern. She continued her story, noting on some level that her voice was

becoming more wooden, more monotone, as she spoke, but she did not care.

"Nott told me that he thought Harry was responsible for the disappearance and assumed death of his father, since Harry had killed Voldemort. He ignored my argument that we were not even in the country when all of that happened. He still thought Harry did it and he planned to hurt Harry by hurting me." Harry growled very softly as she said that.

"Did he say what he planned to do?" McGonagall quietly asked, as if afraid of the answer.

"He did," Daphne said, looking down.

When she said nothing more, O'Shay gently spoke up, his old Auror habits taking hold. "Miss Greengrass, I'm sure it's unpleasant, but we need to you tell us what he said and what happened."

Daphne reached out with her other hand so she could hold both of Harry's hands. She wanted to make sure he did not do something he would regret, but it also gave her a little more strength. In a fearful voice, she said, "He said he planned to use me, and then take me to Knockturn Alley and force me to become a prostitute so Harry wouldn't want me anymore."

Harry jumped to his feet, taking Daphne's hands and arms with him. "Where is he?! I'll kill him!" He looked wild and powerful. In fact, Daphne could feel a tingling from his hands.

"Mr Potter! Control yourself!" McGonagall yelled as she jumped up too, trying to take charge. There was the sound of chairs scraping the floor as both professors stood, hopefully in time to do something useful.

Daphne launched herself to her feet and flung her arms around him. With her mouth at his ear, she whispered, "He's dead, Harry; he's already dead." She felt his arms go around her and squeeze her tightly. Losing herself in him, she enjoyed his presence once again, ignoring the pain in her back. His arms meant safety.

"Mr Potter, please calm down and sit," McGonagall firmly commanded him.

Harry finally let go and stepped back, holding her hands and looking in her eyes. She could feel him searching for the truth, begging for her statement to be true. She looked at him and nodded. As she felt his hands relaxed, she realized how tightly he had been gripping her. Slowly she sat, pulling on him. Harry finally sat too, but he did not release her.

"Then what happened, Miss Greengrass?" McGonagall sat and leaned forward as if eager to hear the story.

Daphne looked at the Headmaster. "Since I had not told him no, I pretended to go along with him and encouraged him." Her voice lost what little emotion it had held and her story became monotone again.

McGonagall looked incredulous and Daphne felt Harry's hands tighten on hers.

"I started taking my clothes off while I talked to him and slowly walked forward. I said anything I could to make him think I was a willing participant, just so I could get close to him."

Harry's hold on her hands became painful, but she did not say anything to him.

"By the time I was down to my bra and knickers, I was standing in front of him and encouraged him to kiss me." Her hands hurt now, but she knew this was hurting Harry to hear it, so she took the pain.

"When he tried, I gouged out his left eye with my thumb."

McGonagall gasped and O'Shay winced. Harry all but released her hands, now only lightly holding on. The blood flowing back into them was almost painful.

"He started to fight back, but I got his wand away from him. Since he was still fighting, I jabbed the wand into his other eye."

Harry grabbed her around the shoulders and held her tightly. She laid her head on his shoulder, enjoying it, while she watched McGonagall close her eyes and lean back in her chair.

“Where is he?” O’Shay quietly asked. The finality in his voice said he knew that Theo Nott was dead.

“I can show you.”

“I’m on reserve, as once an Auror, always an Auror,” O’Shay told her. “I can tell you that you’ll face no charges for his death, assuming we get corroboration from Miss Parkinson. I assume that once you were free that you went after Miss Parkinson for helping?”

She nodded. “I brought her straight here.”

O’Shay turned around and revived Pansy, who moaned piteously. He did a diagnostic on her. “You have some bruises and a few broken bones, but nothing major is wrong with you, Miss Parkinson. Now then, Miss Greengrass has told us what you’ve done in helping Mr Nott commit some serious crimes. You are an accomplice and face some serious charges as well. It will go easier on you if you confess.”

When he had started talking, Pansy looked alarmed. When he was done, she was in a panic. “I didn’t do it! I didn’t do anything to her!”

“If you took Veritaserum, would you still say the same thing?”

Pansy looked even more scared and O’Shay stared at her. “All right! All right!” she finally shouted as her resolve cracked. “I helped Nott capture her by taking her wand, but that’s all I did. Everything else was Nott’s idea. He really wanted to get back at Potter because he thought Potter killed his father. He called in a debt and forced me to help him.”

“Did you know what Mr Nott planned to do?”

The girl cringed, as if trying to sink into the floor. "I'm sorry, Daphne, but it was either help him or he was going to do some horrible curses on me."

O'Shay sighed and looked at a pale McGonagall. "Headmaster, may I borrow your Floo? On duty Aurors will have to be brought in." When McGonagall nodded, as if she did not trust herself to speak, O'Shay walked over to the fireplace.

A few minutes later, a pair of Aurors came through. One pulled out a legal Dict-O-Quill and Daphne had to repeat her story once again. Pansy was questioned again and she admitted her part. One of the Aurors took her to the Ministry and then returned a few minutes later. The group followed Pansy to the scene of the crime.

Since the location was in the dungeons, Tracey and Blaise came upon them. Neither had been present when Daphne had gone after Pansy.

"Daphne, what's wrong?" Tracey looked very worried for her friend. "We heard about what happened in the common room and came searching for you."

"Now is not a good time, Miss Davis, Mr Zabini," O'Shay told them. "Please do your best to restore order in our common room. I shall come there as soon as I can." They nodded and slowly left, looking at Daphne and Harry the whole time.

Daphne opened the door for them, but did not go in. Harry looked in and saw what he needed and stayed with her in the corridor. All the adults went in, although the Headmaster quickly came back out and looked extremely pale, even for her.

"I'm sorry you had to see that, Professor," Daphne told her, "but it was either him or me, and I wasn't going to let him hurt Harry by doing things to me." O'Shay had come out during her statement.

"Miss Greengrass, I stand by what I said. You are not in trouble." O'Shay looked at Harry. "Mr Potter, please take her to the hospital

wing so her injuries can be healed. Also request a Calming potion and a Dreamless Sleep potion.”

“Yes, sir.” With an arm around her pulling her to him, he slowly led her away. Harry looked at her carefully as they walked. He felt she was hanging on by a thread she was so quiet and withdrawn. She did not say a word on their journey. Only the dead body of Theo Nott had really calmed him. If he had not already been dead, Harry was sure he would have gone after him.

Walking into the hospital wing, Madam Pomfrey was there and looked at him. He could tell she almost asked him what he had done now, but one look at Daphne stopped her. “Guide her over here, Mr Potter. What is the problem?” the medi-witch asked as she erected a screen around the bed.

“She said her back was scratched on stone.” The witch gave him a look that said there must be more based on what she was seeing. “She’ll also probably need a Calming Draught, as she’s just been through a traumatic experience.”

“Very well. If you’ll step out, I’ll take care of her.”

“No thank you, I’ll stay.” At the medi-witch’s glare, he added, “She is my wife, and I want to see what happened to her, even if the person who caused it is dead.”

Pomfrey looked taken aback by that. After a moment, she nodded. “Help me take her school robe off.”

When her robe came off, they saw blood spots on the back of her blouse. With magic to loosen it, so as not to pull at the wounds, her blouse came off. Long angry looking scratches with new scabs covered her back.

“I believe a numbing charm, a wound cleaning charm, and then a skin restoration salve will have her back to normal in a few hours,” the nurse said with a smile. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

Harry grabbed a chair and pulled it in front of Daphne, holding her hands and doing his best to give her comfort. She sat there almost listlessly, although he did see the occasional emotion flicker across her face.

The nurse came back with several bottles and handed one to Daphne. "Please drink up, dear. It's a Calming Draught." Daphne downed it without complaint and handed the little bottle back. Pomfrey then scowled at Harry. "Mr Potter, it would be best if you left for a few minutes."

He looked up at her with alarm. "Why?"

Pomfrey seemed exasperated with his slowness. "Because I have to take her bra off."

Harry laughed and he was pleased to see the small smile on Daphne's face. "Madam Pomfrey," he said in an exaggerated patient tone, "she is my wife and I've seen her completely naked. I promise you, I can restrain myself when I see her topless."

The nurse was beside herself with indignation, but stopped her muttering when Daphne giggled.

"Thank you, Harry." It was the first thing she had said since they had left the scene of the crime. "Please proceed, Madam Pomfrey. Harry will stay with me."

The bra came off and Harry could not help but give her bare breasts a good look, which caused him to grin at her. She grinned back, her experience momentarily forgotten.

An hour later, with a bloody blouse in hand and wearing only her school robes over her top, Daphne walked back to her room with Harry beside her. With the Calming Draught, Daphne was almost her normal self, but Harry could tell she had yet to fully come to terms with the incident.

Back at their room, they found a very concerned Hermione, Tracey, and Blaise. The girls went into the bedroom to help Daphne change

her clothes while the boys went to the kitchens for lunch. Harry was thankful it was a Saturday. During lunch, they talked of light subjects, basically anything but the attack. After lunch, they sat in the semi-circle of chairs and couches around the fireplace. Daphne snuggled into Harry's side under his arm. It was not lost on Harry that Tracey and Blaise seemed to be sitting closer together than normal. In this setting, Harry gave a brief overview of the morning, leaving out many details of the attack.

Tracey sighed heavily. "I'm sorry, Daphne. We knew something was off with Nott. If only we had paid more attention to him..."

Daphne shook her head but didn't say anything, so Harry did. "Thanks, Tracey, but it's really not your fault. If he didn't say or do anything around you to indicate he was going to attack us, you have nothing to blame yourself for."

The girl nodded in acknowledgement. "I know, but I still feel like we should have done something." She looked over to her friend as Blaise patted her hand.

"I feel the same way too," Blaise said, "but Harry's right. If we had known, we would have done something, but we didn't know."

Surprising everyone, a house-elf suddenly popped in, standing in the middle of them.

"Solly?"

The elf turned to the familiar voice. "Mistress Daphne." He bowed and glanced at Harry, but talked to Daphne. "I am very sorry to bother you, but there is an emergency at home." He glanced at Harry again.

"What is the problem?" Daphne hurriedly asked.

"It is your sister. She suddenly came home for a visit. She is telling your mother things are not going well when her man come to the house and demand in a loud voice that she come home. This is much yelling between everyone. Sister's man yells the loudest that it is your fault his brother is dead and he wants your father to punish you. Your

father tells him to go away, but he won't. I is afraid they is about to fight."

Harry stood up and pulled his school robes off for easier movement, leaving jeans and a long-sleeved T-Shirt.

"Harry?" Daphne asked with concern.

"I have to go. He is challenging you and I must respond." He glanced around; his eyes lit up when he saw his Firebolt leaning against the wall. Ron had returned it then instead of later.

"Harry!" She paused as it because obvious he was going to go no matter what, and she knew he had to. "I'm coming too," she finally said.

He wanted to argue, but understood that she would want to see how this ended; he knew he would. "Fine." He grabbed his broom.

"Out the window again?" she asked with a touch of humor.

"Again," he grinned, thinking of a happier time. Then he had one more idea. "Solly, after we've been gone for a couple of minutes, please go tell the Headmaster what you've told us and ask her to send Aurors to Greengrass Manor."

The elf looked to Daphne for confirmation.

"Do as he says, Solly. Where are my sister's husband and my father?"

"They is yelling near the front door."

The scheming Daphne returned. "Then before you go talk to the Headmaster, go back and tell my sister to meet us at the gazebo in the back garden. We must talk to her first." Daphne mounted the broom behind Harry as the elf popped out.

"Be careful, Harry," Blaise told him.

Harry nodded. "Always," before he slowly flew out the window. When they were clear, he coaxed the broom to its best speed, which was slower than he preferred because there were two people on it. Of course, even the "slow speed" was still many times faster than walking and they were at the gates of the school less than two minutes later. Landing on the other side of the gates, he shrunk the broom and put it in his pocket.

"Do you remember the gazebo, Harry?" she asked with a wicked grin before she Apparated away.

How could he not remember the gazebo, after how she had teased him out there one evening? Recalling the little structure, he Apparated after her.

He had seen a picture of Astoria before, but that did not prepare him for how much they looked alike. While not looking like twins, there was no way not to miss that they were sisters, they looked so much alike, except for the forming bruise on Astoria's face.

"Harry, this is my sister, Astoria; and," she looked at him with much love, "this is my husband, Harry Potter."

"Mr Potter." The older sister held out her hand.

Harry grasped it and kissed the back of it in the way Daphne had shown him. "Mrs Nott."

"Astoria -- please," she almost begged him.

"You must call me Harry. Now, what is happening?"

"Aurors came to our house an hour or so ago and told us that Theo had -- threatened -- Daphne." She looked down.

"Did they..." Harry started to ask, but had trouble saying it.

"Yes, they said exactly what he threatened. Then they said the she killed him in self-defense. Hector, my husband," she said with some

distaste, “dismissed the Aurors and flew off the handle the moment they were gone.

“He hit you, didn’t he?” Daphne accused, looking at the dark red mark that seemed to be slowly turning purplish.

Astoria looked down before she quietly said. “He was nice in the beginning, but I wish that father had not had to create that contract. I envy you, my sister.”

Harry’s blood wanted to boil, and he could see the anger on Daphne’s face. “Are they still at the front door?”

“As of a few minutes ago,” Astoria confirmed. “Hector will not go away and father can hold him off indefinitely with the help of the house wards.”

Harry pulled out his wand. “You two, go in the house and stay safe. I will Apparate to the front gate so that I can safely approach. Since his argument is with Daphne, I will respond.”

“His argument is with you too and he will fight you, probably to the death,” Astoria told him with a look of fear. “Be careful, Harry; he is a good fighter. While he wasn’t a Death Eater, he has the temperament of one, and he will have no qualms about casting the Killing Curse.”

He nodded. “Thanks for the advice.”

She put her hand on his arm to keep him there a moment longer. “And Harry, do what you have to do.” Astoria paused and looked him in the eyes. “Your life is more important than his. I can accept any outcome except having to grieve for my sister.”

Daphne flung herself onto her sister. Harry nodded in understanding before he Apparated away.

A scant second later, he was at the front gate to the house. A hundred yards in front of him was the front door to the Manor, which contained Hugo Greengrass. Hector Nott was twenty yards from the door and shouting with large gestures. Harry could not quite make out

the words, but the angry tone was clearly audible. He started marching towards the confrontation with wand in hand.

When he was fifty yards from the house, and thirty yards from Nott, Hugo looked at him. Harry was sure he had been seen before, but this acknowledgement was meant to make Nott notice him too, and he did. Turning sideways, so he could try to keep Greengrass in his vision, Nott saw Harry.

“Potter!” he spat. “Did you do the manly thing and come to defend your murdering bitch?!”

“It was self-defense, Nott. Didn’t you hear what the Aurors said?”

“The Aurors said she killed him with her bare hands,” he screamed. “He couldn’t even defend himself because she took his wand away.”

“Which was after he cowardly forced someone else to hit Daphne in the back to take her wand way.” Harry hoped he could make Nott do something stupid. He was not quite prepared for the response he got.

“Liar! I challenge you to an honor duel!”

A glance to Hugo showed him to be surprised too. The nearest window contained the three women in the house, who also looked surprised, as well as fearful. He wished he had not seen that.

With calmness that Harry was not sure he felt, he replied, “I could challenge you as head of your family for what your brother tried, but I will accept your challenge.”

A maniacal grin came over Nott as he turned to fully face Harry, knowing that Greengrass would not interfere. “The fight is to the death, Half-blood, Avada Kedavra!”

Harry stepped to the side. He was thankful for Astoria’s warning. “Reducto!” Nott barely got out of the way after needing a brief moment to recover after the Unforgivable. The Blasting hex appeared to hit only robes and continued on to splash on some shield over the front of the house, but Harry did not give it any thought as a new spell

was coming towards him. He jumped back the other way and sent a strong Cutting curse back silently -- after a quick mental berating for forgetting to be silent and giving away what he had cast.

But Nott was not there. He had Apparated away.

Harry immediately sprung to the side and he was glad that he had as a curse went through the space he had just been in, since Nott had Apparated to a few feet behind where he had been. Harry Apparated ten yards way, using that movement to get back to his feet, and he cast a quick Stunning spell.

Laughter came from his left immediately after Nott disappeared again. Harry Apparated twenty yards away and cast another Blasting hex back to where Nott had been, with 'had been' the important part. Nott had Apparated to his right and was sending another curse.

Harry Apparated behind Nott, who disappeared again. This was getting annoying, so Harry tried something different. He spun and dropped to his knees, making sure he was slightly to the side of where he had been. Sure enough, Nott had Apparated a couple feet back and was casting another spell where Harry had been.

Avoiding the wand arm of Nott, Harry shoved his wand forward through a tear in the man's robes and up with all of his strength like a short sword, catching Nott in the stomach. Nott's spell was aborted in mid-cast and he looked down at Harry with wide eyes. With his wand embedded at least a couple of inches in Nott's stomach, Harry silently cast the Banishment charm as it required no wand movement. Nott flew up nearly five feet in the air with blood spewing out his mouth. He landed in an ungainly heap several yards away and did not move.

"Accio wand!" Nott's wand flew to Harry, who deftly caught it. It was the vigilant thing to do.

He stood and looked down at his opponent. He almost wished he had not; the body was a mess. "Harry!" he heard screamed. Looking up, he saw Daphne running out of the house for him. She hit him at a full run and it was all he could do to not fall down. He managed only by turning around in a circle and carrying her too, causing her feet to fly

out. Setting her back down, he reveled in her fierce hug and then passionate kiss.

A crunch in the yard caused them to stop their display of affection. Harry saw a grim but smiling Hugo Greengrass, with his wife on his arm. Cassandra looked very relieved. Astoria was next to her mother with an expressionless look, and Harry was concerned about what she might say, despite what she had told him.

Astoria slowly walked over and gently pulled Harry from Daphne and gave him a hug. "I'm sorry you had to do that, Harry," she whispered to him so that only he could hear, "but I'm very grateful to you for fixing Father's mistake. I owe you and Daphne." She kissed him on the cheek before she pushed him the half step back to Daphne and then stepped back to be next to her mother again.

Harry was not sure what to make of that, but he was sure that he needed to sit down. With the fight over, he felt like he was going to fall over soon. "I need to sit," he softly said.

"Of course," Hugo said, suddenly springing into action after the moment of enjoying the relief of the battle being done. "Daphne take him in and have Solly get him a shot of Firewhiskey. I shall get the Aurors. They're outside the wards trying to get in."

Glad for the help, Harry leaned on Daphne as they walked in. Cassandra joined them, but Astoria stayed outside. Inside, Harry gratefully sank into the large leather chair that Daphne guided him into. He was barely down when Solly appeared with a small glass. Not thinking about it, Harry gulped it down, then wished he had not. It burned going down and made him cough, which sent small tongues of flame shooting out of his mouth. Daphne giggled and dropped into his lap. Harry held her close, burying his face into her hair and chest.

He knew he would have to talk to the Aurors and give his story. A terrible thought came to him. "Was he the last of the Notts?" Harry asked to the room.

"He is the last of that branch," Cassandra replied. "Hector was the head after his father went missing and was declared dead. There are some relatives, but those branches are not as ... extreme," she finally said after thinking for a second. "You will have no problems with them, Harry. I believe it is really over."

"What about his mother?" Harry asked worriedly.

"No," Cassandra said with a sad shake of her head. "Margo died about nine or ten years ago under mysterious circumstances. I always felt her husband arranged her death, but nothing was ever proved."

Harry felt the relief wash over him. He was done fighting the Notts. The Aurors chose that moment to walk in. Harry was pleased that Hugo was smiling, that gave him confidence. He would give his statement and then stay here through dinner. He really did not want to face the school just yet. Daphne had a lot happen to her today too, and despite the calm face she wore most of the time, he knew that tonight would be hard for her.

Harry and Daphne had returned that evening to find a very worried Tracey, Blaise, and Hermione. Hermione was having trouble sitting still once Tracey and Blaise clued her in on what could happen, based on Pureblood traditions, or the Old Laws. She had thrown herself on Harry when he returned, then she had apologized to Daphne for doing that. Over Butterbeers, which Solly had brought them, much to Hermione's dismay even if she did drink one, Harry told about their afternoon.

Blaise informed him that Pansy had been expelled and taken away by Aurors while they were gone. He also said they knew of no one else who was as hostile. A handful of other students bore watching, but not even Crabbe and Goyle, who had also lost their fathers this summer, should be a problem. However, Blaise and Tracey both promised to be vigilant for their friends.

The next morning, the article in the Daily Prophet was mostly accurate, but very unflattering to the Potters. It went so far as to question Harry and Daphne's motives of killing off a Pureblood family.

Daphne was very angry and Harry barely stopped her from getting up and explaining the facts to the editors with her wand. He took her back to their room to cool off.

Daphne paced for a few minutes and Harry let her. Suddenly she turned to him. "Harry, you said that Sirius left you some money. How much?"

He looked at her, wondering what she was up to. "A couple of million Galleons, I think, plus a few houses. Why?"

"That should take care of most of it," she said smugly, before she fixed him with her scheming expression. "I'm going to write a counter article and they will publish it tomorrow or face a lawsuit. I will not allow you or myself to be slandered like that. Also, tomorrow you will start the process of buying the Daily Prophet."

Harry jerked up from his slouch in the chair. "Are you serious?"

"Yes. They probably won't sell you very much, so you'll have to get proxies to buy parts of it for you. Once you get majority ownership, there will be a change at that newspaper. If they print stories about us, it will be factual or else they will be very sorry."

Harry hoped she meant they would only be sacked, but decided not to ask. She was still wound up from the article this morning. "OK, I can do that. I'm sure your father, Lupin, and some others would buy up shares with money I can give them. I can also probably get the goblins to act like an agent for an anonymous buyer for a fee."

"You can, but approach them last as that fee will be expensive." She sighed. "Countering disinformation is the sort of thing Dumbledore should have done for you over time and never did. I believe it would have helped you avoid some of the trouble you had."

"This would be the PR stuff you mentioned?"

"Yes. Most people will believe whatever they read in the newspaper, so you can't let bad information stay out there like that. When you

own the Daily Prophet, that will be a good first step towards your hope of fixing the Wizarding world," she explained.

"That would be nice," he agreed with a wistful smile.

"Then we'll get you on the Wizengamot and eventually make you the Minister for Magic. Then you can really effect change."

"Ah yes," he said with a grin, "your plan for me." He reached out and grabbed her, pulling her into his lap. The action instantly broke her seriousness.

"Harry!" she squealed in surprise. He moved his hands to grab her in more private places. "Harry!" she groaned, ceasing to struggle. They did not come out of their room until lunch time.

At the end of dinner, which the Potters were having at the Slytherin table, a very nervous Ron walked over. "Harry? Can I talk to you and Daphne?"

Harry looked at him, wondering what this was about, until the memory of his last conversation with Ron came back to him from what seemed like forever ago. Their troubles with the Notts had pushed everything else from his mind. "Is this about stating your beliefs?"

Ron swallowed hard, glancing at the Ice Queen sitting next to Harry. "It is."

"All right, then. Please escort Daphne back to our room. I need to give a few messages to people while I'm here. I'll join you in a moment." Harry offered a hand to Daphne, who used it. She stood and then walked over to Ron. She did not take his arm, but she indicated she would walk next him. The two slowly walked out, leaving a grinning Harry behind.

Harry whispered to Blaise before walked over to the Gryffindor table. A minute later, a small group was walking behind him through the halls.

Entering his common room, Harry saw Daphne sitting on one of the small settees and Ron standing in front of the fireplace with a look of shock on his face at the group at the door. Harry smirked as he walked in and sat beside Daphne, letting Hermione, Neville, Ginny, Blaise, and Tracey take whatever seats they wanted.

"Ron, you stated your beliefs in front of these people, so it seems only fair to have them present when you correct that."

"But Harry," Ron protested, "not all of them were there." He had tilted his head towards Blaise and Tracey.

"True, but you have affected them and will have to work with them closely if you want to become a best friend again. So it seems only right to have them here." Harry was calm and gentle on the outside, but he was about to bust a gut on the inside; it was tough to hold his laughter in. A glance at Daphne showed a small satisfied grin.

Ron looked down shuffled for a moment, as if screwing his courage up. "Daphne," he finally looked up at her, although he could not quite hold her eyes. "I would like to apologize for the things I said last June. Over the last few months, I've seen that you're not a bad person. In fact, despite my earlier statements, I think that you're a good choice for Harry. You seem to make him happy. In my defense, I was prejudiced by the actions of Malfoy, but Harry was correct to tell me that Malfoy is not how all Slytherins really are. I -- I hope you'll forgive me and be my friend."

Harry was really quite impressed. His friend seemed very sincere. However, Daphne was staring at him, her gaze boring into his eyes. He understood what she was doing and hoped for a good outcome. After a moment she gave a slow nod. "On behalf of the Slytherins here, I accept. I understand that Draco Malfoy made this difficult on you, but it was still your decision. I'm glad that you've changed your mind. I believe you have one more thing to say?" While it was a question, there was not doubt in anyone's mind it was really a command.

Ron nervously nodded and looked at Harry. "Harry, well, you've just heard what I think now, but I can say that I'm sorry I said those things to you. I was wrong in everything. I appreciate you still being my friend, but I hope we can now go back to being best friends."

"We can be best friends again, Ron," Harry said with a sad smile, wishing the break had never happened, "but know that you're not my only best friend now. You'll have to share me not only with Daphne, but with Hermione, like you always have, and now with Neville and Blaise. They are all best friends. And so you know, Ginny and Tracey are becoming best friends as well, friends I will not do without. Do you think you can fit in?"

Ron quickly nodded. "Yeah, I think that would be great."

Daphne looked at Harry. "Yes," he told her before looking back to Ron. "So Ron, would you like to be in my wedding? Neville will be my best man, Blaise will be joining me, but I've got one spot I've been holding for you..."

Ron considered it, several emotions going over his face. It was not hard for Harry to guess at his thoughts. He suspected Ron had always thought he would be Harry's best man, but Ron had lost that spot due to his own stupidity and prejudice.

"Yeah," Ron said after a few seconds. "Yeah, I'd really like that."

"Excellent, mate," Harry said with a real grin. "Get yourself a chair and relax. Del!" The elf popped in. "A round of Butterbeers for everyone." The elf grinned and left, returning a half minute later. It was nice to have all of his friends back where they belong.

In the privacy of their room that evening, Daphne looked at him. "You're happy that Ron's fixed his mistake, aren't you."

"Yes," he admitted while taking a boot off.

"I'm glad too. You need friends, even if they are stupid Gryffindors who don't use all the brains they have."

Harry chuckled, not bothered at her jibe at all.

"There's still one loose end. What are you going to do?" When he gave her a confused look, she simply said, "Snape."

Harry pulled his other boot off and leaned back, looking at her. "I'm not sure I can bring myself to just kill him, but I know I can't just let him go either. Even with an Unbreakable Vow not to harm us, I have a feeling he'd find some way around that and do it anyway, even if it was with his dying breath."

"He would," she agreed. "I could make a Vow that would stop him for hurting us, but my fear is that he would do something to our children, or their children. You need to make it permanent, Harry. Someone may find him one day and revive him. It may be ten or twenty generations from now, but that would not stop Snape from declaring war on our family."

"It may not matter," he said after some consideration. She gave him an "explain now" look. "I'm not saying that you made a mistake, but I think something is wrong with him."

"What do you mean?" Daphne had stopped undressing too and sat next to him.

"Last time I was there, he looked different, paler or perhaps a little more gray. But I know that potion is supposed to put him in stasis, so that shouldn't be happening. Yet, I'm sure he's changing."

"Show me."

Harry looked into her eyes and dropped his barriers, showing her the memory of when he first placed Snape there and then the next two visits. When seen together, it was obvious that something was happening to Snape.

"I didn't see any changes in Voldemort," she said after a long moment.

"He wasn't under as long, but I agree. I didn't notice any change in him."

"So maybe it's something only with Snape..."

"Could be," he agreed.

"I'll research it."

"Tomorrow," he told her with a grin. "Tonight, the only research I'll allow you is with me."

Daphne matched his grin. "Yes, my husband..." His lips did not let her say more for quite some time.

Christmas was in a few days and there were home for the holidays. With a wedding the day after Christmas, they were about to not have any free time until their honeymoon, and they did not want to deal with this on their honeymoon. So they Apparated to a special cave by the sea and entered. Harry opened the hidden door and guided Daphne through.

Going over to the alcove where the last body lay, they saw Snape. He was slightly grayer than last time.

"Well?" Harry asked. "You're the potions expert."

She did a few diagnostic spells on the body; all came back negative. "It's hard to tell, as the Draught tries to make the person look dead, but I think he really is dead. The Draught is only slowing down his decay and making it look like he's still alive. However, I still think you should dispose of him, just to make sure."

Harry grunted, still not happy. "Why? Why would he be dead anyway?"

"How should I know?" she shrugged. "Maybe he was cursed with something else? Maybe he had a disease? Maybe he was allergic to

the Potion? Who knows? But the point is, anything you do to him won't be killing him."

"That just because you think he's dead. We don't really know." He did not want to kill anyone if he had the choice, even someone as messed up as Snape.

She gave an exasperated sigh. "If it will make you feel better, I'll give him to the Inferi."

"No," he quickly said, "I'll do it in a minute." He would spare her that, he thought. He looked down at the body, wondering why Snape had made the choices he had, choices that had harmed a lot of people, while later helping many through his bravery as a spy.

Snape's body suddenly flew away, skimming over the water of the underground lake. When it splashed, Inferi broiled out of the water and ripped at Snape. He was gone forever a few seconds later.

He looked at Daphne, seeing her put her wand away. "Why? I said I'd do it."

She gave him a look that made him feel like a little boy. "Because I can deal with this easier than you can, Harry. I could tell by the way you were looking at him. You were agonizing over having to do it, weren't you?"

"Yes," he admitted, knowing he could not lie to her about this.

"Then it's better that I did it. Besides, I already told you he was dead, so I didn't kill him. I just hid the body," she told him with a smirk. "Now let's go, we have lots to do before next Friday."

"Yes, dear." He chuckled when she rolled her eyes at him. It was a new "game" he had started recently with her. Neither of them was fooled by Harry's apparent meekness.

Christmas came and the Potters opened presents at their home before going over to the Greengrass home. With both daughters there, it was just like old times, except for Harry being there too.

Astoria was looking much healthier than the day her husband had died.

Boxing Day brought the official Potter/Greengrass wedding. Harry did his best to stay out of the way. Daphne had everything arranged and he just went with the flow. Cassandra had found a little castle that had been “perfect” for the wedding. Harry was not sure he agreed, but then again, Daphne seemed to be happy, so he assured her that it was great. Daphne was not fooled by his response, but she did not give him a hard time about it either.

When the wedding ceremony started and Harry saw Daphne in her white robes, ones that hinted at so much but covered everything, he was once again amazed that she was his. She looked so beautiful, but he also thought she looked that way because she was also a beautiful person on the inside.

The reception afterwards was a test of patience, Harry thought. He knew a number of people there, so he had no lack of people to talk to. However, there was a sizeable number that he met for the first time, and people he would just as soon not met at all. These were the people, who did not directly follow Voldemort, but they did believe in the Pureblood supremacy theories that Voldemort had tried to advance. Harry considered that this was part of Hugo carrying out his promise to reach out to these people, and the wedding was the first step to show that Harry and the winning side were not bad people. He knew there were other reasons as well, but he tried to think only of the positive possibilities.

One person that really surprised Harry by showing up was Percy Weasley. Harry had invited all of the Weasleys, and Percy had recently reunited with them, so he came too.

“Harry.” Percy held out his hand. “Congratulations to you and Daphne.” At the mention of her name, the bride turned around to see who it was. Her sister looked on too.

“Thank you, Percy,” Harry said very slowly, looking at the wayward Weasley very carefully.

Percy did not stand the scrutiny for very long before he looked away. "Er, Harry, while I'm here, I feel it would be a good time for me to apologize to you. I know that I did not treat you as I should have, and for that, I sincerely apologize."

Harry let the barest touch of his Legilimency out; Percy was either being truthful or hiding very well. "Thank you, Percy, I accept," Harry told him graciously. Percy did not seem like the type of person to lie about this. Be a git and believe the wrong thing -- yes; but lie about an apology -- no.

With a small grin at an idea, Harry turned to Daphne's sister. "Astoria, do you remember Percy Weasley from school?"

Percy gave a start as he looked at her closely. "Astoria Greengrass?"

Astoria gave him a small smile and a nod. "Percy, it's nice to see you again." She looked at Harry. "Of course I remember him. He was Head Boy when I was in sixth year."

There were times that Percy seemed Slytherin to Harry, so he said, "Percy, would you be so kind to escort Astoria around for awhile? Her escort left her about a month ago and I think you would be a good one for her."

Percy looked at Harry for a long few seconds before he suddenly smiled. "Of course, Harry." He looked at Astoria and held out his arm. "Miss Greengrass, with your permission?"

Astoria gave Harry a look that he interpreted as "you better be right about this". "Thank you, Mr Weasley." She took his arm and they walked off towards the punch bowl.

"Are you sure about that?" Daphne quietly whispered to her husband.

Harry shrugged. "It's only for the evening, but otherwise, yes. I think there could be some common ground between them."

Daphne stretched up just slightly and kissed her husband. "Then I hope it works out for her. She could use someone good in her life."

"He's honorable and a Slytherin in Gryffindor's clothing at times." He shrugged. "I guess time will tell." They returned to visiting with guests.

As soon as the reception was over, Harry and Daphne left for a week long journey around the Mediterranean Sea on a Muggle cruise ship. After that week, they spent a week in the family villa in Spain. Harry found out why it was one Daphne's favorite places to go, and he had to agree. It was truly a lovely place.

When they returned to school, everyone that knew them wished them well. Daphne had a hard time keeping a goofy grin off of her face for the first week back whenever someone called her Mrs Potter. Her Ice Queen personae slipped more than she liked for that week.

Quidditch was going very well for Harry. By the end of the year, Gryffindor was undefeated and won the Quidditch Cup. Harry took great pride in it, and Daphne even more. During his last game, Quidditch scouts had come to the game and Daphne made sure she sat next to them and talked up Harry's abilities.

School went well for the Potters, except for one thing: Hermione. As she had done for OWLs, she tried to put everyone around her on a revision schedule and got upset when no one used it. It was Harry who finally sat her down and explained that they all appreciated her help, but they already had their own schedule. Having anticipated this, Harry pulled out one that he had had Daphne create. Hermione was not pleased when she looked at it, as she thought they were not doing enough revising. In the end, Harry got her to let up when he pointed out that she would have more time to revise if she only worried about herself.

Harry invited all of his close friends into the common room for the Head Boy and Girl. Besides Hermione and Daphne who lived there, Neville, Tracey, Blaise, and Ron were there. A late addition to the usual crowd was Hannah Abbott, who had recently started dating Neville seriously. Ginny and Luna were also there, although they still had one more year to go. Everyone grabbed a bottle of Butterbeer out of a large tub of ice, courtesy of Del, and took a seat. Each of the couples had their own settee, the singles had chairs.

"What's the problem, Hermione, you look sad?" Harry asked.

The Head Girl lightly tapped the bottle with a fingernail, as if trying to see if it was soundly made. "It's over, Harry. School is over. We've taken our NEWTs and we ride the Hogwarts Express for the last time tomorrow. Everything we strived for ends tomorrow." She took a sip of her drink and looked around.

"Thanks, Hermione," Ginny said a little sarcastically. "I've got another year to go and you're making me depressed."

"Sorry, Ginny, but I really wasn't trying to do that, it's just, well, so many of my goals are done..."

"Then it's time to make new goals," Tracey said pragmatically. "Didn't you say that you wanted to go to a Muggle university?"

"Yes, I've already been accepted into a small private one. I'll attend there for a year or two then transfer to Oxford."

"How long do you plan to be there?" Harry asked her.

"At least four years, but probably six. I'd like to get a masters degree."

Harry smirked. "I think that will work just fine. Just don't forget to practice your magic." Daphne joined him in a smirk.

"What do you have planned, Harry?" Blaise asked. "That's a 'I've got a plan' look if I ever saw one."

Harry smiled at his wife and casually grabbed her hand. "I've agreed to Daphne's plan." A number of surprised looks greeted him. "In two weeks, I become the starting Seeker for the Arrows."

"Yes!" Ginny shouted while Ron groaned.

"Harry, why couldn't you have picked the Cannons? They'd have a winning chance then."

Everyone laughed at Ron. "Sorry," but Harry did not really sound that way. "I prefer to play for a team that has a chance of winning. The Arrows finished second this last season because of their very good Chasers. I'd like to hope that with me as Seeker, that will be enough to get us into first place. I didn't think their old Seeker was all that good."

"He wasn't," Ginny agreed. "He was next to last in Snitches caught, only beating the Seeker from the Cannons." She rattled off the stat without hesitation.

"So Quidditch? Any chance of free tickets?" Neville asked with a smile, to let Harry know he was not totally serious.

"I'll see what I can do," Harry said good-naturedly. "I'll do that for five to eight years, while also being a part-time member of the Wizengamot. Hugo seems to think I won't have any problem getting a seat in a year. That will allow me to get my name known there as well as find out who can be trusted and who can't."

Hannah spoke up. "I thought you didn't like your fame?"

Harry gave her a wry smile. "Deep down, I really don't, but Daphne has convinced me that if I really want to change the world, there's nothing wrong with using every tool at my disposal."

"Of course not, Harry. You would be mad not to do so," Luna softly told him as she looked at him with her large eyes that rarely blinked. "Do you think you could get them to release all the data on the various creatures they haven't told us about? I know they know but don't want us to know, you know?"

He looked at her as he thought that through, deciding there was only one safe answer. "I'll see what I can do, but I can't make any promises as I don't know what's there yet." Luna nodded and went back to studying the label on the bottle in her hands.

"Why do you plan to only play that long, Harry?" Ron asked. "Except for permanent injuries, you should be able to play for ten or fifteen years."

"True, but Daphne thinks that I should be able to peak in popularity at about that time, which will be a good springboard into my political career: working on the Wizengamot full-time. That will allow me to affect a little more reform. She thinks I should also be able become an advisor to the Minister too."

"You mean like Lucius Malfoy was?" Blaise asked.

"Yeah, except I won't be corrupt like him." Everyone laughed, including Harry. "When the next election comes along a couple of years later, I'll win the Minister's position and then I can really bring about change and pull us all into at least the late twentieth century, only about ten or twenty years behind the Muggles."

When everyone finished laughing, Hermione asked. "And what does all of that have to do with me?"

Harry gave her a grin as if it should have been obvious. "When I start working with the Wizengamot full-time, I'll already have the sneakiest witch as an advisor, but I'd like to have the smartest witch of the generation as my chief of staff."

Hermione blushed only a little. "The flattery is nice, Harry, but why would I want to be chief of your staff? I don't mean to belittle your idea, but I can do a lot more challenging work than that."

"You can," he admitted. "But there are three very good reasons for you to accept when I ask you a few years down the road." She crooked an eyebrow at him. "First, it gives you direct input into the changes that will be made. I have some ideas, as does Daphne, but we both acknowledge that you are a master at research and thinking things through. Daphne will be around to help you make the ideas workable in the political arena, but if you really want to affect change, Hermione, you have to be part of the game."

"I'll think about it. What are your other reasons?"

"When I become Minister for Magic, my chief of staff can become the Senior Undersecretary, if she likes."

Hermione eyes grew wide. “That’s the number two position in the Ministry.”

“It is,” Harry said with a grin. “The last reason is, because when I’m done with my reforms, I’ll be stepping down, but the people will want someone who understands them and me to continue to lead them. Also, it will be easy for you to become the first Muggle-born Minister. Don’t you want that? It’s the only think that I can think of that is better than Head Girl.”

She looked very torn. “I had thought about coming back her to teach too.”

Harry knew he had her now. “Do both Hermione. Do you really think the Board of Governors would turn down a former Minister for Magic who wanted to teach? No way.”

“He’s right,” Neville agreed.

“Bloody right,” Blaise added.

Everyone looked at Hermione as she thought it all through, the concentration on her face was intense. “Uhh,” she finally growled. “Why do you have to do this to me? I thought I already had the next ten years planned out.”

Harry grinned. “You don’t have to decide now, but promise me you’ll think about it.”

Hermione nodded. “Are you not going to try to change things sooner?”

“I’ve already started on one of the most important parts,” Harry said with a chuckle. “I now own fifty-three percent of the Daily Prophet.”

“What?!?” everyone but Luna shouted, although the Ravenclaw did give him a very interested look.

"I'm tired of them printing lies about me, so I started buying it a little at a time. When we get home tomorrow, Daphne and I are going to go by their offices and explain that if they want to keep their jobs, they will only print the truth from now on, especially about us," Harry said with a little anger in his expression. "The first part of fixing things is to show everyone how bad things really are so they will want to change."

"That's very Slytherin of you, Harry," Tracey said with a smile. Her boyfriend nodded his agreement, so she kissed his cheek. Blaise looked very happy with her.

"You can thank Daphne for that idea." Harry leaned over and kissed her on the cheek.

"Daphne?" They all looked at Hannah. "What are you going to be doing, besides advising Harry?"

"I'm his agent too..."

"And a very good one," Harry interjected. "She got me a great deal with the Arrows," he added in a conspiratorial whisper to everyone.

"Thank you, dear." Daphne gave him a peck on the cheek. "I'll do that for about the next eight months, then I plan to take some time off."

There was a moment of silence before the girls all squealed, even Luna, although hers was more subdued. Tracey rushed over and gave her friend a hug. When she released Daphne, each of the other girls gave Daphne a hug too.

"What?" Ron asked.

Blaise rolled his eyes. "Really, Weasley." He looked at Harry. "So a boy or a girl?"

"Daphne will give me an heir," Harry said majestically and with a grin that split his face.

"Way to go, stud!" Blaise got up and took a large step over and high-fived Harry, as did Neville.

"She's pregnant?" Ron finally got out; he looked stunned.

"Just found out yesterday," Harry said smugly.

"That's ... wow ... uh," Ron stumbled over his words. "Better you than me, mate."

Ginny laugh loudly. "Yeah, Mum would really be ticked if you had a son on the way, Ron. Congratulations, Harry." She looked genuinely happy for him.

"Thanks, Ginny. It's still a little hard to comprehend, but we're happy."

"Harry, do you really think you can do everything you've planned?" Hermione was obviously still thinking about this offer.

"I could say that after defeating Voldemort, this will be easy, but I think I have a better reason for being successful." Harry turned and looked at his wife. "I have Daphne."

(Fourteen years later)

Harry handed out the last of the Butterbeers to the small crowd in his back garden. Taking his, he opened it and cleared his throat. Everyone stopped talking and looked to him. He could not help but be pleased. They had stuck together, as well as added a few more people, but his best friends were with him at the beginning of the end of his plan.

"Although it may have taken a little longer than originally planned," Harry winked at his beautiful wife, who raised a finely manicured eyebrow at him, causing him to grin, "here's to a successful conspiracy to make me Minister for Magic. May the rest of our plans go as well!"

"Here, here!" was shouted by everyone as they clinked bottles.

"So what now, Mr Minister?" Neville called out in jest, everyone laughed.

"I think I need to take office tomorrow first, my friend." Harry looked at Neville, who was not only his best friend, but also a fellow Wizengamot member of several years. His wife, Hannah, stood by him. She had been a great help, especially after she had taken over running the Leaky Cauldron. Hannah let them know what the 'common wizard' thought, and she also helped to push out Harry's thoughts.

"Pish, you've practically been running the Ministry for the last year," Hugo Greengrass told him, his wife next to him.

Harry just smiled, all of his shyness gone, thanks to nine years in the spotlight as a Quidditch star and then five more as a full-time Wizengamot member.

"I had plenty of help. For example, Percy has been invaluable." Harry pointed at the blushing Weasley. Although he may have been embarrassed with the praise, his wife, Astoria, was beaming.

"So, Harry, what's left for you to do?" Ron asked him.

Harry looked at his long time friend, as well as his wife turned Muggle super-model, the former Lavender Brown. She had used her fame to help Harry get his ideas across to the general Wizarding public, while Ron had worked as an assistant coach for the Chudley Cannons. "Plenty, Ron. Most of the changes I've made over the five years, or even the eight before them were the easy ones. Now it's time for the hard work."

Hermione MacMillan snorted. Her husband, Ernie, looked amused too. "Getting the Fair Beings Act passed was amazing. I mean, who would have thought that all the sentient magical beings being treated equally in the eyes of the law would have been possible twenty years ago?" she asked rhetorically. "That's special, but we have so much more to change."

"That's our Hermione," Tracey Zabini said. "Ready to change the world with nothing to stop her." Blaise led the laughter.

"But we wouldn't want her any other way," Ginny Wood said.

"I don't think anything can stop her," Oliver Wood said with a grin. "She's more powerful than a well hit Bludger."

Hermione groaned, but it was Ernie who said, "Leave it to you, Oliver," he told the Quidditch star, "to use a Quidditch analogy for Hermione."

"What's wrong with that?" Ron asked, and it did not look like he was teasing.

"Nothing for you, Ronald." Ron looked at Luna, who was balancing her empty Butterbeer bottle on one finger. Even more amazingly, her husband of three years, Rolf, seemed just as entranced with her ability as she was.

"Do you still want to work in the Department of Mysteries, Luna?" Harry asked.

"Certainly, Harry. I'm sure they have many mysterious things there that just need a little extra help to be explained. How hard can it be?" There was not a trace of mischievous on Luna's face.

"It's hard to argue with that," Ernie said quietly, but everyone seemed to hear him anyway.

"Daddy! Daddy!" a young voice yelled. Everyone turned to see six year-old Hugo Potter-Greengrass come running towards them. "Tell James to quit turning my hair blue."

Harry looked at Daphne with a hint of asking for help.

"Don't look at me," she told her husband. "You're the one that wanted four, AND you taught James that charm."

Harry caught his youngest as Hugo barreled into his legs. There was a blue streak in the boy's hair. "Where is your brother?"

"Over there," the boy pointed, "behind that bush."

Pulling out his wand, Harry cast, "Accio Wand!"

"Hey, no fair," the thirteen year-old cried as his wand went flying through the air to his father. Now that he was found, he came out from behind the shrubbery. Everyone who saw him thought he was a clone of the younger Harry, right down to the green eyes and messy black hair.

A tinkling laughter came from behind Harry's oldest, followed by his eleven year-old daughter, Jade. She was the image of her mother, except for her green eyes. In fact, all of the Potter children had green eyes, even nine year-old Sirius, who walked with Jade.

"James, what have we told you about changing your brothers' and sister's appearance with spells?" Harry gave him the disappointed father look, causing the boy to look down.

"Not to."

"Then I think I'll keep this wand for the next week."

James started to protest, but a look from his mother stopped him cold.
"Yes, Dad."

With a smile, Harry walked over and put his hand on his eldest's shoulder. "A wand is not a toy, you know that." James nodded. "Then act like you know it or I'll keep it for the rest of the summer."

He looked horrified. "Y-yes, Dad."

"I know you'll do the right thing now." The boy puffed up with pride, his indiscretion momentarily forgotten. Harry patted him on the shoulder and sent him back inside. The rest of his children went into the house too.

"Not bad, Harry," Hugo Greengrass told him. "Now if you can just do that for our society."

"I think he can," Daphne said as she walked over to him, putting her arm through his. "I think he can do anything ... with me to help him," she said with an impish smile.

"Well, I am the Minister for Magic -- tomorrow," Harry said.

Everyone laughed and clinked bottles. Harry called Del out to collect the empties as he passed out full ones. With family and friends such as this, making the world right seemed possible.

(The end)

((A/N: OK, this really turned out to be almost another complete story, as this is roughly the size of the original four chapters. I hope everyone enjoyed it, but this is really the end of this universe. I won't add any more, no matter how many people ask.

Again, thanks to ReadingFreak2005 for his help in beta'ing this story. I find it maddening as an author to read through my stories multiple times, thinking I've got all the errors, only to find the return from my betas to have more errors highlighted. As painful as that is, I truly appreciate the help as it makes for better reading. Thanks Andrew!

I have more stories or continuations of stories coming... Kevin))